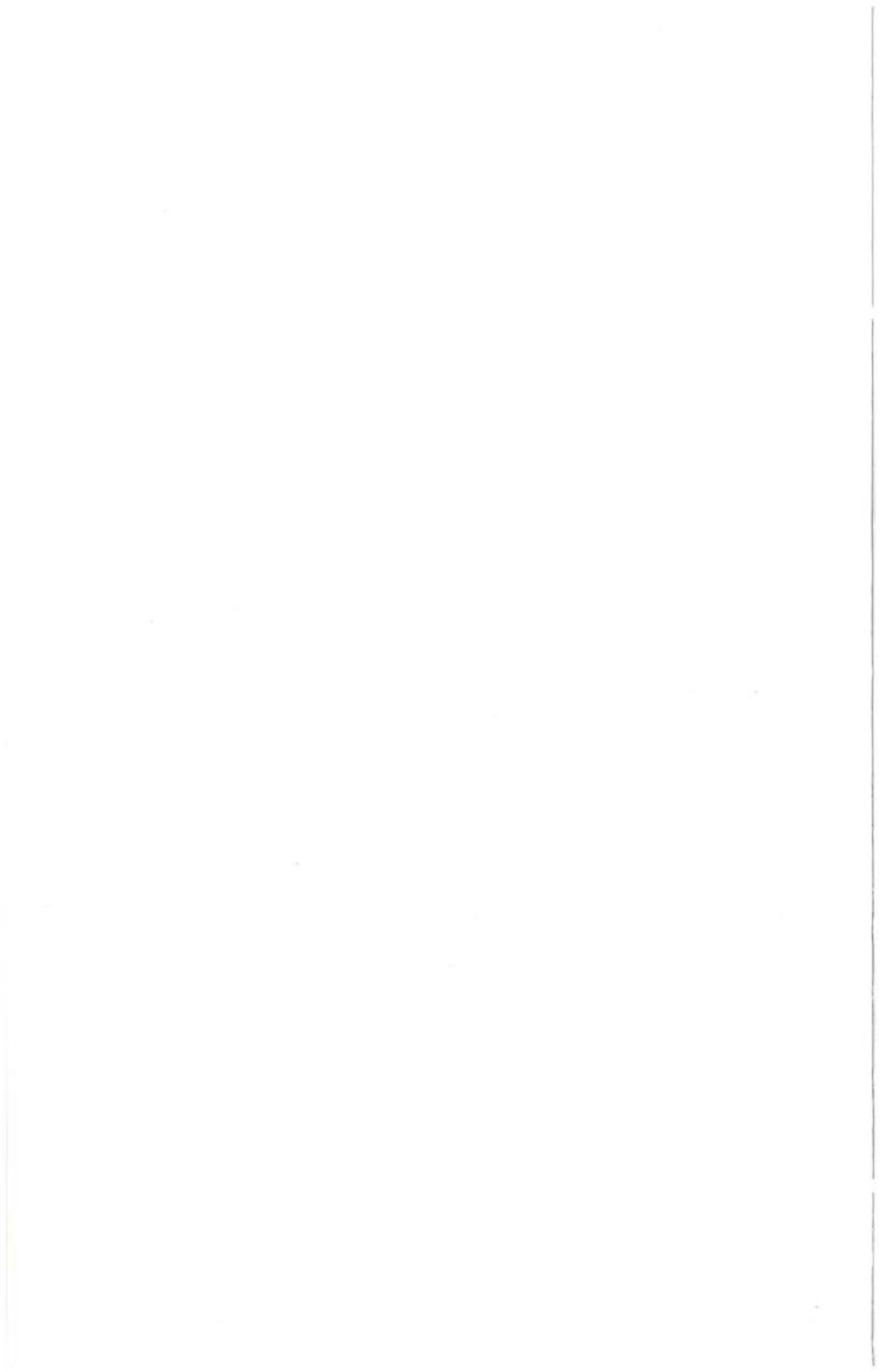


# Ambassador To His People

C. F. Klassen and the Russian Mennonite Refugees



Herbert & Maureen Klassen



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Winnipeg, MB, Canada

Hillsboro, KS, USA

**Ambassador To His People**

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Dedicated  
to our children  
Tanya  
Matthew/Cathlyn  
Steve/Evy  
Mark  
Rebecca  
and a whole new generation  
of disciples

And to all those who have  
given of themselves  
to minister to refugees  
in the Name of Christ



## CONTENTS

Foreword by Peter J. Dyck	ix
Prefaces by Authors	xI
Introduction	xv
I. RUSSIA 1894-1928	19
Chapter 1 Beginnings	19
Chapter 2 War and Revolution	33
Chapter 3 Famine and Relief	47
Chapter 4 Aftermath and Reconstruction	58
Chapter 5 Emigration	67
II. CANADA 1928-1945	80
Chapter 6 New Beginnings	82
Chapter 7 Reiseschuld - Travel Debt	88
Chapter 8 Family Matters	102
Chapter 9 War and Peace	112
III. EUROPE 1945-1954	117
Chapter 10 'Seeking His Brethren'	119
Chapter 11 Preparing for Emigration	133
Chapter 12 The Volendam Story	143
Chapter 13 Patience Tested	156
Chapter 14 Paraguayan Trip	166
Chapter 15 Changes at Home and Abroad	177
Chapter 16 Peace Conference	184
Chapter 17 A 'Dark Valley' for Emigration	195
Chapter 18 Homes for the Homeless	204
Chapter 19 Celebrations	217
Chapter 20 Uniting the Wider Mennonite Brotherhood	225
Chapter 21 The Last Year	237
Chapter 22 Home at Last	252
Notes about Sources	259



# FOREWORD

This book had to be written. At a time of diminishing respect for basic human values C.F. Klassen embodied selflessness and integrity of character that should be an inspiration and model for many young people today.

In telling the story of CF the authors are also telling the story of his time and conditions in Russia, the great depression in Canada, the spiritual vitality, or lack of it, in the Mennonite church. CF can only be understood if we understand the world in which he lived and acted.

All who knew him, knew that he loved his people, the Mennonites. Only those who knew him intimately also discovered how much he loved the Russian people. One reason why he was never bitter about them, in spite of the treatment Mennonites generally and he personally received at their hands, was because he understood their own sad history of suffering under the Czars and the communist dictators. They had never known freedom. They had never been allowed to stand up tall and straight. From being submissive serfs for centuries they were finally cajoled or flogged into utter submission; voiceless and powerless to determine their own or their country's destiny. Knowing this helped him not only to accept them but also to respect them (especially for their patient suffering), grieve for them and love them.

The opening statement of the May 25, 1954 editorial of *The Mennonite* says: "There is probably no living Mennonite who is so widely known and so universally respected as was the late C.F. Klassen, who died in Germany of a heart attack, May 8." Widely known he was, not only in the Mennonite world but also in government and United Nations circles where he moved about with dignity and a relaxed style that could be the envy of any diplomat. Universally respected he was also, except perhaps by a few of his own people who either did not understand his actions

and motives or were confused in their notions about the role of leadership. The fact that he was tall and handsome, that in his public appearances he was sure of himself and his message, that he spoke freely about his negotiations with officials in high places, had some critics conclude that he lacked a proper sense of Christian humility, that he probably was tainted with pride.

It was a thoughtless and erroneous conclusion. Those who knew him well knew that he was as humble as a child. That is why nobody ever heard him say, "I can," but countless numbers of people heard him say repeatedly, "Gott kann!" God can, he is able! Of course God needed hands and feet, he needed a human voice to speak for him—and that is how CF perceived of himself, a servant of the Lord speaking and acting for God.

CF was not only a man of courage, perseverance, diplomatic skill and integrity; he was also a man of great faith. On one of his frequent trips to Geneva, Switzerland, on behalf of Mennonite refugees after WW II, he failed to get their official recognition as bona fide refugees. Naturally, he was disappointed, but in reporting this to his co-workers, I remember him saying, "I wonder how the Lord is going to work this one out?" He believed in the rightness of their cause and had absolute faith that God would change the minds of the officials. He did. The Mennonites from Russia in Germany were given official refugee status.

Cornelius Wall, speaking at the funeral of CF in Frankfurt, Germany, said: "We are gathered here to bury a man, but each of us says within himself, 'to me he was much more.' To some, like the refugees, he was a helper in the hour of need; to others, like his co-workers, he was a shining example of what living for others means; to still others, like people in the congregations that supported him, he was a constant inspiration; and to officials in high places he was a reminder that truth and integrity need not be compromised however difficult the task or noble the ends.

To me personally he was a wonderful colleague in the work of MCC, a dear brother in the Lord, and my beloved brother-in-law.

Peter J. Dyck  
Easter, 1990

## PREFACE

In May 1954 when my father died, I was twenty-five, single, and enrolled in the theological faculty at the University of Basel. Since the age of fifteen I hadn't seen that much of my father. During the last nine months of his life my mother, sister and I joined him in Europe where I did see a little more of him, met most of his co-workers and associates and was at the places associated with his work and ministry.

In writing the book together, my contribution was more on the historical side, Maureen's on the inspirational and literary side. Our purpose in writing the book was not to attempt an exhaustive biography, but rather a biographical memoir to inspire the younger generation. They will know best whether we have succeeded.

Anyone more interested in the background of CF's life will find the work of Frank Epp's *Mennonite Exodus* and John B. Toews' *Lost Fatherland* invaluable. We have quoted liberally from CF's reports and diaries to let him speak for himself as much as possible. We are grateful to the MB Board of Publications for letting us make use of a brief sketch of his life by his brother Henry F. Klassen who was editor of the *Rundschau* for many years. It appeared first in German in that paper and was subsequently translated into English at the instigation of the Board. It is a 31 page text appended with 44 pages of documents.

We would like to thank Harvey Dyck for the nudge that helped to move us from thinking about writing to starting.

We are indebted to many in the larger MCC constituency who encouraged us along every step of the way. John H. Yoder, to mention just one, contributed substantially to the shape of the book through comments and questions raised from his hospital bed in Indianapolis, where he was recovering from an automobile accident.

We are grateful to Neil Fast and the DeFehr Brothers for making a research trip to Europe possible in the summer of 1984 (which included the Mennonite World Conference at Strassburg), and to the Quiring/Loewen Trust for a grant that enabled us to

devote some concentrated time in the last stages of completing the writing.

One incident from the German trip bears repeating. I was interviewing the well-known author Hans Harder in Schluechtern just north of Frankfurt. The afternoon I arrived he had an elderly lady with him on her once in a lifetime visit out of Russia. She had been a close friend of his sisters. When we were talking about my father and Moscow she suddenly said, "My father was the Rev Johannes Klassen who performed the wedding ceremony of your parents fifty-eight years ago in the Menno center in Moscow. Yes, I remember the day very well!" That's the kind of 'coincidence' that has encouraged us along the way.

The kind cooperation of Ken Reddig at the MB Archives in Winnipeg, Lawrence Klippenstein at the Mennonite Heritage center, Leonard Gross at the Goshen Historical Library, and Gary Waltner at the Mennonite Historical Archives at the Weierhof in Germany, lightened the load of research considerably. I accept full responsibility for any inaccuracies left in the text.

Herb Klassen

## PREFACE

CF Klassen was my father-in-law. I never met him. When I first contacted Mennonites in Europe in 1956 he had been dead just two years. His memory lived on and his name was often mentioned by Pax-boys and VS'ers whom I met in my work with MVS and relief work. His legacy was a continuing one in the many efforts at relief in Post-War Europe and I sensed the stature of this man whose compassion had shaped the growth of MCC and its ongoing ministry of mercy.

After working in Germany and Austria for two summers, my interest in Mennonites led me to cross the ocean and take up studies in Goshen in 1958. There I learned more of the heritage of this pilgrim people. Harold Bender took me under his fatherly wing, and I even wrote a paper for him in the Seminary on the Mennonite settlements in Russia. In 1959 I married CF's son and cast in my lot with the Mennonites for life.

During our study of CF's life we have spent many hours reading reports and correspondence, laughing and crying over stories of mixed joy and sorrow. Through it all I have become acquainted with a man I never met. I have sensed his heart-beat of faith and compassion, seen his courage and perseverance and his struggling humanity. I have touched the spirit of the father I never met.

One day during a period of writing at the peaceful home of friends on Vancouver Island, while reflecting on the great inspiration he had become to me, and regretting the deprivation of never having met him face to face, a sense of peace and wellbeing overwhelmed me. I realized that he is an abiding part of my life and that of my children, and that his legacy is a spiritual reality in the fabric of our gathered lives. At that moment something of the reality of being 'in Christ' and the truth of the communion of the saints in the body of Christ gripped me. Then I knew myself to be truly a daughter (by faith) of CFK and one who can carry his torch to a new generation. Though our paths never crossed in this life, we shall indeed one day sit down at table in the Kingdom of God. Then the shadows of our earthly pilgrimage will fade and

the eternal verities of that Kingdom and its principles will prevail.

CF, you have been a father to me in the faith. You have mirrored to me the Father of all mercies as you did to countless others during your life time. May your example rekindle in the hearts of many others the image of our true Father in heaven, whose Name we hallow, whose Kingdom we seek and whose Will we pledge ourselves to follow all the days of our lives.

Maureen Klassen  
Father's Day, June 17, 1989

# INTRODUCTION

## **'A Legacy of Mercy'**

On Friday May 7th, 1954, a black Chevy was travelling westward across north Germany from Bremen towards Holland. A few miles from Gronau, a German border town, the driver sensed something seriously wrong with his heart. On arrival at a friend's home in Gronau he phoned a doctor who insisted he come immediately to the hospital. He was admitted and treated and spent a restful evening reading and visiting with his friend. He expected to resume his journey the next day to keep his promise to be in Heerewegen, Holland on May 8th to speak at a Peace Conference. But that was not to be. A further massive heart attack occurred during the night. At 10:30 the following morning he ended his life's journey. He was fifty-nine years old.

Although an urgent message had been sent to his wife in Frankfurt, she was unable to reach him before his death. As he had lived and worked, so he died, in the midst of yet another journey.

Within hours, news of his death had reached beyond family, friends and co-workers in Frankfurt and was beginning to have repercussions on three continents, Europe, North America, and South America. During the following week hundreds of condolences and telegrams reached his widow from around the world, and memorial services were held in Germany, Canada, the USA, and South America.

Who was this weary traveller who hardly had time to rest on that fateful journey? What was the life task that consumed his energies just short of his three-score milestone? Why did his death send ripples across the world evoking a sense of personal loss from countless other sojourners who owed their presence in

new homelands, and sometimes life itself, to the tireless efforts of this man?

And what were the tides of history that brought forth such a servant of his people? What influences moulded his life and fashioned him into a vessel usable in the hand of God who cares for the homeless, the fatherless and the bereaved? In an age of heartlessness, brutality and conflict, from what spiritual roots spring this powerful expression of mercy and compassion?

To answer these questions we need to trace the life of CF Klassen from his early years in a humble Mennonite village in Russia through the turbulent period of the Russian Revolution and its massive upheavals of peoples and culture, the relatively quieter resettlement years in Canada, the Depression and War years; and finally back to the challenges of post-War Europe where his path led him to countless homeless and scattered brethren, and where he sought to help gather up the pieces of their fragmented lives and find for them a new beginning. This was the task and the journey that came to such an abrupt ending that day in May 1954.

In our study of CF's life several dominant themes or motifs emerge, which gave his life significance beyond his own personal plans or ambitions. As he followed the leadings of his life these themes gripped him more and more and became the impetus that urged him on through many difficult times, against insurmountable odds. In the face of these, the faith motif of his life's motto "Gott kann" recurs again and again. Then there were the many times that his faith took shape in courageous action. At such times he merely claimed he did what had to be done. How many men have shaped history with actions thus described? The theme of self-denial is discerned at the many times when he learned the path of obedience to God's call on his life. We meet him often in the role of mediator and peacemaker, emissary and reconciler, enriching our picture of this servant of his people.

But most of all in the unfolding story of CF's life we encounter the theme of mercy and compassion in its manifold responses to the cries of the needy in a broken world. This quality, blended with the other themes of his life, delineates him as a man especially equipped to become a role model for this present generation, faced as we are with heightened awareness of global

suffering and the ever-present kaleidescope of human heartache and horror. We can be thankful that the example of lives like his can become pointers along our common journey, of the way God wants to relate Himself to his creation, and the way He calls us to flesh out in our lives his qualities of love and mercy. Such is the message of CF's life and the 'legacy of mercy' entrusted to us in the telling of his story.



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# I. RUSSIA

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## Chapter 1

### BEGINNINGS

*"Give me my son, your heart" (Prov. 23:26).*

As the nineteenth century drew to a close, imperialism flourished in many parts of the world. Whether beneath the flags of Queen Victoria, the Czars, or other European monarchs, the people of the earth were being subjugated, supposedly for their own good, and learning the ways of 'better' civilization and culture. Far away from the great centers of civilization, the small religious group called Mennonites had virtually established their own little kingdom on the steppes of Russia. For over a century they had pursued a peaceful existence, in their own colonies of villages, and established a unique way of life - Germanic and radically Protestant.

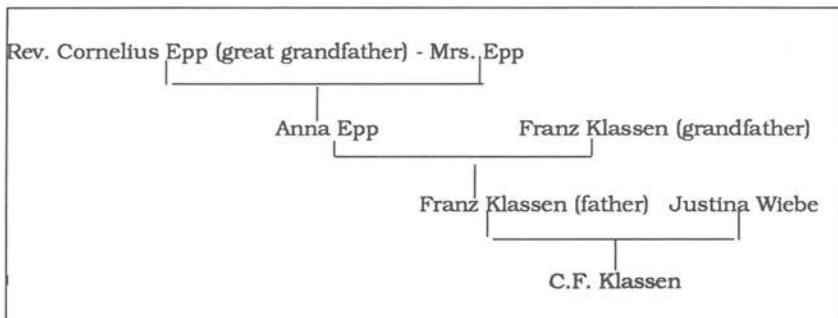
Donskoj. It was at the end of the village and it was here that they built their log house. What stuck in CF's mind was that during the construction he had stepped on a nail that was sticking through a board. The next year his father built another building on the same property and opened a general store. The goings-on at the store interested little Cornelius so much, that he says he had little interest in attending school in the fall. But before he left for school it would be good to find out a little more about who these Mennonites were and where they came from.

Though set in the heart of the Russian steppes in rich agricultural land and far away from the major cities of Russia where already the seeds of massive cultural and political revolution were being sown, the Mennonite colonies enjoyed peaceful seclusion for their close-knit spiritual and cultural existence. German was the language of faith and Low German was the language of family and farming. Both were instrumental in moulding a strong and unique life-style that set them apart from the lives of the Russian peasantry around them. How this came about and what it forbode for the future are both critical in an understanding of the fabric of CF Klassen's life and pilgrimage.

### **Mennonites Come to Russia**

The first Mennonites came to Russia from Prussia, now Poland, from the area around Danzig, now Gdansk, in the year 1789—the year we associate with the beginning of the French Revolution. The Polish people were in the unfortunate position of being partitioned in these years between three larger empires, Russia, Austria and Prussia (later to become Germany). The area around the mouth of the Vistula River where the Mennonites had settled fell into the hands of Frederick the Great. Poland had been a homeland for this group of Mennonites ever since the second half of the 16th century when they had fled there from Holland where as Anabaptists they had been persecuted for their faith. When Frederick began to threaten their peaceful life-style by conscripting their men into his Prussian army and putting pressure on their school system, they began to look for another place to settle. They were happy to accept Catherine II's invitation to Rus-

## Diagram of these Relationships



the only child of his daughter Anna, and now the birth of his first great-grandchild made him very happy. It added greatly to his joy when he heard that this boy was to be named 'Cornelius' in his honor." CF adds, "I don't doubt that his joy would have been even much greater had someone been able to tell him that his grandson Franz would have another nine sons and four daughters within twenty-three years! (Biographical Sketch 2)

One of CF's earliest memories was a trip to the Molotschna to visit his great-grandfather who, incidentally, was reported to have been one of the first Mennonite preachers in Russia who did not read his sermons but spoke extemporaneously. He wanted to see his grandson Franz and his great-grandson Cornelius before his death, so he sent them the funds to make the trip, second class. CF writes,

Though I was not quite four, I have four distinct memories of this trip: 1) Enroute, in the comfortable train car, I was bitten up badly by bedbugs. 2) There was considerable excitement when my father noticed that one corner had been cut off our leather trunk and some things had been stolen. 3) In Lichtfelde, in my great-grandparents' garden, I remember my mother knocking apples off the tree with a long stick, which I gathered. 4) I can also remember clearly how great-grandfather bought some grapes, brought them home in his large red handkerchief, then laid them out on the workbench and lifted me up so that I could eat them. (Biographical Sketch 4).

CF gathered from stories told by his parents that they had a great desire to move from the land to some place in a village. By 1899 they were in the position to buy about 100 acres in

So unique was this life-style that we need to pause and sense some of its force and reality before we can fully comprehend the extent of disruption and displacement soon to be inflicted on its members. We need to see the quiet rural prosperity of the farms and the unprecedented success of its industries (mills, factories etc.). We catch the spirit of its life-style in beautiful estates, well ordered villages, fine institutions for the sick and handicapped, reputable secondary schools and colleges, and flourishing churches. Before serfs were ever freed or the decadent aristocracy deposed, Russia sheltered such a model of success and harmony as yet unmatched after years of revolution and toil. Yet such 'success' was not to survive, for the devastation and disruption that invaded their quiet world would echo down the corridors of history for generations to come.

It was into this peaceful scene that CF Klassen's father had been born and lived most of his life. CF's own grandchildren are enjoying in Canada again such a time of peace. Yet by contrast CF's own generation was caught up in many decades of unprecedented upheaval.

In a brief biographical sketch CF (as he became known once he moved to Canada) says of his father Franz F. Klassen that

he was born April 30, 1870, in the village of Lichtfelde, Molotschna, where his father [another] Franz Klassen had a farm and a store. When the daughter colony, New Samara, which was located 200 miles east of the city of Samara, was to be settled, grandfather Klassen was one of the first to move there in the year 1890, and chose a spot near the Tock River where he started a general store on his own private estate ('chutor'). Among other things he also sold building materials. My father worked in this business when he was a young man. As more and more new settlers arrived new villages were laid out. Among the new settlers in the village Dolinsk was the family of Mennonite Brethren preacher Gerhard Wiebe, who had come from Landskron, Molotschna. His oldest daughter Justina, born August 30 1874, caught the eye of the young Franz Klassen and they were married in Dolinsk in 1893.

The young couple began their married life under rigorous pioneer conditions. A sod hut on their father's 'chutor' was their first home. It was in this hut that their first child arrived on August 3, 1894." CF continues the story by adding that

great-grandfather Cornelius Epp had a special liking for my father,

sia where they were promised greater religious freedom, exemption from military service and plenty of land to farm. One condition that bothered some of their spiritual leaders was the fact that they were not supposed to proselytize.

These first settlers put down roots in the southern Ukraine about 200 miles directly north of the Crimea and the Black Sea. The Colony was called Chortitza, after the river that flowed through the settlement and on into the Dnieper, which empties into the Black Sea. This settlement was made up of nineteen villages covering about 400,000 acres.

One hundred miles south east of this, a second settlement, called the Molotschna Colony was started, beginning in 1804. It was also named after the river flowing through the settlement. New settlers kept coming from Prussia until the 1830s and the Molotschna colony finally was made up of sixty villages. Later it was divided into two districts, with Halbstadt as the administrative center for thirty-one of the villages and Gnadenfeld as the center for the rest. People from these colonies were a vital part of CF's story to the end of his life.

So it was from the Molotschna, the largest and most prosperous settlement that CF's grandparents originally came. But why had their families moved from their pleasant surroundings in the Ukraine, 900 miles further north-east into central Russia beyond the Volga where the climate was harsher and conditions more primitive?

The main reason was overcrowding in the mother colonies. By mid-nineteenth century these settlements had a growing landless class that was creating quite a social problem. Sub-dividing of the typical 175 acre farm was not permitted so many were forced to consider some alternative. Large parcels of land were purchased by the original colonies and sister colonies began to spring up in the Ukraine and beyond. There were settlements in the Crimea (Karassan, Spat etc.) and in the area called the Kuban between the Black and Caspian Seas (Alexanderfeld, Wohldem-fuerst etc.)—an area 300 miles north of what is now known as Armenia—also along the Volga near the city of Samara/Kubishev (Old Samara, New Samara etc.), and in the foothills of the Ural mountains (Ufa, Orenburg etc.), and further east beyond the Urals in Siberia (Slavgorod, Barnaul etc.). Finally there were over

100 Mennonite villages in Siberia alone, farming over one million acres. It must be remembered that at this time they were settling there voluntarily. It was only after the Revolution and under Stalin in the 1930s that they were forcibly exiled to the far northern wastelands of Siberia.

This gives a little impression of how widespread the Mennonite settlements were in Russia. By World War I it is estimated there were about 65,000 Mennonites in the Ukraine and about 45,000 elsewhere.

The 60,000 acres which became the New Samara colony were purchased in 1890 by the Molotschna colony with the first settlers, including the Klassen and Wiebe families, arriving in the early spring of 1891. Twelve villages were laid out along the southern bank of the Tock river with Donskoj, Pleschanow, and Lugowsk being three of the largest and most central—and closest to the water-powered flour mill, an important landmark in any society committed to grain farming. The closest railway station was Sorotschinsk about twenty-five miles away. The city of Samara (now Kuybyshev) on the Volga River was about 200 miles directly west of New Samara. Directly east of New Samara about the same distance lay the Mennonite settlement of Orenburg, in the foothills of the Ural mountains.

By 1903 the Klassens' store had done so well that the family was able to move their business to a house in the center of the village right next to the village school. During these years four more sons were born to Franz and Justina: Franz in 1896, Gerhard in 1897, Peter in 1899, and Henry in 1900.

### **The Mennonite Brethren**

It was about this time that Jacob Kroeker (1872-1948), a young evangelist from Molotschna visited the MB church in Lugowsk, one of the New Samara villages. Kroeker had spent four years at the Baptist Seminary in Hamburg, Germany, and was quite a fiery preacher. He was warmly received among Mennonite Brethren but never actually joined them. He had come under the influence of Dr. Baedeker and the 'Allianz' movement and attended its annual conferences at Blankenburg. While he was in

Lugowsk revival stirrings broke out that caused quite a response throughout all the neighboring villages. Cornelius' parents also attended. The Mennonite Brethren church membership grew rapidly as a result of this awakening and by the fall of 1901 a new and larger church structure had to be built. The dedication was attended by little Cornelius and his parents.

It was a great occasion among the Mennonite Brethren (MB) of Russia. It was not only the largest church in the whole New Samara colony, it was the roomiest MB church in all of Russia at the time. It was built on a rise at the west end of the village with bricks made on the spot and laid by a master bricklayer and his two apprentices who had come specially from Molotschna for this task. Rev. David Duerksen from the Crimea, one of the leading MB preachers in all Russia, was there. There were also other visiting preachers from Molotschna and Orenburg. Rev. Cornelius Neufeld from Davlekanova was there with his whole choir. The dedication ended with the singing of Handel's Hallelujah Chorus, and was followed by a common meal. It is estimated there were 3,000 in attendance (New-Samara 86). It was into this church ten years later that CF would be received into membership, and that twenty-five years later would drop him temporarily from its roll, at his own request. But all that was yet in the future.

But who were these Mennonite 'Brethren' that CF was influenced by and later identified with? The movement began forty years earlier in 1860. Eduard Wuest, a Lutheran pietist from Germany had been pastoring the Lutheran church in the village of Neu Hoffnung just south east of the Molotschna colony. He was an outspoken evangelical stressing repentance, conversion, and a life consistent with the Christian faith. Some of the Mennonites attended his meetings and his annual Missions Festivals.

A group of these Mennonites then began to meet on their own for Bible study and prayer. The laxity in their Mennonite churches began to offend them and they exhorted their churches to exercise church discipline. This was interpreted as self-righteousness and was opposed by most of the leaders in the churches. These 'awakened' Mennonites, who were referred to as 'brethren,' finally asked that communion be administered to them separately. When this was denied, some of them met anyway and

had their own communion. Just a few days later on January 6, 1860 eighteen of these brethren signed a document at Elisabeththal in the Molotschna declaring themselves an independent church, but within the Mennonite brotherhood. The Elders among the 'churchly' Mennonites (commonly used of the main-line Mennonites—'kirchlich' in German) resisted them strongly and the ill-will that was manifested on both sides before the 'brethren' finally received recognition and legal status from the government has taken over a century to heal.

The Mennonite Brethren emphasized repentance from sin, conversion as a personal experience of faith in Christ, and a life of prayer and conduct in keeping with the Bible. They stayed with the teachings of Menno Simons, renouncing military service, abstaining from taking the oath, and calling for simplicity of life. Whereas other Mennonites had used sprinkling in baptism the brethren came to adopt immersion. They elected their ministers from the membership. In May 1860 they elected Heinrich Huebert as their first elder and Jacob Becker as minister, and the movement began to spread through the colonies. In the 1870s 200 MB families joined the larger emigration to the United States and Canada. By 1885 they numbered 1,800 in Russia and were meeting in seven congregations and ten other unorganized groups. The most extensive account of MB beginnings is in P.M. Friesen's *The Mennonite Brotherhood in Russia* (1911).

## School Years

But this religious split in the Russian Mennonite brotherhood didn't mean much yet to seven year old Cornelius. It was in the fall of 1901 that he entered elementary school. His father took him across the street to the school and introduced him to the teacher, Mr. John Sudermann. Cornelius mentions in his biographical sketch that his father taught him to write before he entered school. He says,

I can still picture the first sentence which he wrote for me in his lovely hand: 'The lion is the king of the animals.' His writing was better than that of my teacher, and I was now ordered to write my letters as the teacher did, but I continued to write as father had shown me. I have few special memories of my village school years.

To do my lessons was not difficult, and I passed the tests without much effort. The highlights were those times when father visited the school, or the elders of the two congregations in New Samara came to inspect the school (Biographical Sketch 5).

As far as my spiritual development was concerned those elementary school years were foundational. I was too young to understand fully what occurred when my parents had a spiritual awakening and made the decision to follow Jesus and openly confessed this. It was during the time when such brethren as Heinrich Guenther and Abram Nachtigal conducted evangelistic meetings in the villages, also visiting the various homes during the day. Many people broke down, confessed their sins, and gave thanks for the forgiveness of their sins. In our home family worship became deeper and more personal. Outwardly things also changed; my father not only stopped smoking but removed all smoking materials from his store. Among my comrades I heard it said that the Klassens were also now among the 'holy [pious] ones.' One change which did not please me at all was that traveling preachers often stayed with us. In spite of all my efforts, they would corner me and inquire about my spiritual welfare. But it was the prayers of my father and mother, especially during evening devotions, that made me aware of the fact that I was a sinner. This conviction gradually led to a deep desire for forgiveness, and one evening, I too, was able to receive this thankfully. I will never forget it. My parents rejoiced with me and were happy too that this occurred before I left home for school in the Crimea. (Biographical Sketch 7, 8)

Although his father had experienced a spiritual awakening he never officially joined the MB church. He took the 'Allianz' position, which has already been referred to in connection with Jacob Kroeker, a position that felt no need to decide between the 'churchly' Mennonites and the 'brethren.' Some might say Cornelius inherited some of this from his father, both in the family and in his association with the different kinds of Mennonites. In later years many were not sure which brand of Mennonites CF belonged to. His mother, however, was more solidly of MB background, and as it happened, she provided more of the necessary strictness and discipline in the family. Their eldest son also inherited a goodly measure of this from his mother, as will be seen later.

In the summer of 1907 there was considerable discussion in the Klassen household about where Cornelius should attend high school. His father would have liked to send him to the school in Ohrloff from which he himself had graduated, but since his

sister, Aunt Greta in Karassan was willing to provide room and board it was decided that Cornelius would go to the high school there, in the Crimea.

When the day came his six brothers were sad to see him go. Two more had arrived, Abram in 1902 and Jacob in 1904. Justina, the first girl to arrive brought great rejoicing into the growing family, but she was just a year old when Cornelius left for school. When the big day arrived the father with his seven sons went by horse and buggy to Sorotschinsk the closest railway station. Little Henry said he couldn't hold back the tears (HFK 12).

Cornelius never forgot what his father said to him at this time: "Remember that all you do reflects on me, for you carry my name." This motif reappears at many points in his life and would be applied also to his loyalty to his heavenly Father.

Life at home with six brothers had been full of exciting activities, although from an early age it was evident that Cornelius showed signs of having a weak heart. When it came to certain kinds of heavy work and athletics it was quite apparent that he could not keep up, though he drew as little attention to this as possible. He was tall for his age and well built and to all appearances healthy and strong, but when it came to running and swimming in the Tock his brothers noticed that his weak heart would force him to drop out long before the others. He did his best on these occasions to cover it up or shrug it off. His parents too hoped that it would gradually correct itself. They were not encouraged however when their son Abram died at the age of fourteen of a heart disease. As we will see later his father died of a stroke at the age of fifty-four and his mother at fifty-nine. Unfortunately there is no official medical information available analyzing this weakness.

It had been very noticeable that from a young age Cornelius was very orderly and took good care of his clothes and his appearance. He always tried to see to it that his boots and shoes were neatly polished, his hair combed, and his few belongings in his room tidy and in good order. It became a nuisance to his siblings when he tried to apply this to the harnesses and tools in the barn as well. Later in life it was interpreted by others to be a form of pride. These habits were deeply engrained within him for they remained with him throughout his life.

CF says, "During my first year in high school I was not very industrious and barely passed my exams. This really embarrassed me, as far as parents and teachers were concerned. I knew that my negligence was sin and repented of it. Things changed and my second and third years were much better, so that I could readily accept my father's gift—the last trip home from Karassan involved a boat ride along the Volga River." (Biographical Sketch 9)

A few incidents stand out in these high school years. On one occasion he wrote home to his father asking what he should do about a student who had taken offence at a teacher and had defaced a public building with some uncomplimentary comments about the teacher. The other teachers in their desire to discover who was guilty, were encouraging the students to expose their classmate as a point of honor. Cornelius had taken the situation to heart and asked his father for counsel. His father wrote back saying "No, do not reveal who it is, but encourage him to settle the matter himself." Cornelius took the counsel seriously accepting responsibility for his fellow student and being willing to confront him (HFK 15). This willingness to accept responsibility for others was part of the leadership quality the Lord was developing in him. Later when the Lord was looking for someone to risk his life for his brethren he found a willing heart in Cornelius.

While at high school Cornelius was greatly inspired by his study of Johann Cornies' life. D.H. Epp's book on Cornies had just appeared. Writing later in *Mennonite Exodus*, Frank Epp refers to Cornies as the administrative genius "who directed the Agricultural Association which became an all-inclusive department of economics and culture for the colonies" (21). Although there is no question about the major contribution he made to Mennonite life in the 1830s and 1840s in the fields of agriculture, education, and administration, there is some concern about his authoritarian approach.

The quotations that Cornelius picked out from Cornies' letters are quite revealing. Cornies writes "I feel compelled to work to the fullest of my ability while it is day, for the night is coming when no one can work. I'm putting my trust in God my Saviour, rather than looking too much to others or being swayed by those who see things differently than I do. Above all I must not be half-hearted, but forge ahead in God's strength. My purpose in life is

not to accumulate property and become wealthy, but rather to serve my fellow men" (HFK 15). In the process Cornies did become quite wealthy and at times served his fellow men, unfortunately, by pushing them aside.

As a high school student, however, Cornelius was impressed by Cornies' accomplishments and summed him up in glowing terms: "The youthful goal of this fiery and determined man was to be a responsible member of the Mennonite church contributing to its well-being and growth. In matters of faith and conscience he desired to be tolerant toward others and kindly to all men, quick to forget any wrongs done to him, quick in keeping his promises and in carrying out tasks entrusted to him, with orderliness, perseverance and steadfastness. He was open and loving toward all those that sought his acquaintance or were looking for help and counsel, regardless of their station in life" (HFK 15-16).

There is no doubt that some of these qualities which he admired in Cornies were beginning to take shape in his own life. This kind of admiration and respect for an older leader became typical of CF. All through his life his closest friends were older than he was and he looked up to them as the teachers and preachers and leaders God had raised up to bless our brotherhood. He thought of himself more as a younger disciple called to do the practical tasks at hand, whereas they were called to speak and teach the Word of God. In his life it included patriarchs like Christian Neff and Elder David Toews, B.B. Janz, Benjamin Unruh and his brother Abram Unruh, Harold Bender, Orie Miller and many others. He never thought that most of them would outlive him and would be honoring him at his funeral rather than he at theirs.

After completing high school in the Crimea in the spring of 1910 Cornelius returned to his family in Donskoj. He was at home for one year assisting his father in the store, and it was during this year that he made a full commitment of his life, and decided to follow the Lord in baptism. During the rest of his life he testified unashamedly of Christ as his personal saviour and Lord. When asked to preach he often quoted God's desire as expressed in Proverbs 23:26 "Give me my son, your heart." He had yielded his heart to the Lord and was now baptized in the river Tock and

received into membership in the MB church of Donskoj/Lugowsk.

## Moscow

In the fall of 1911 Cornelius was sent off to Moscow where he began an apprenticeship in the office of the German gas motor company of Otto Deutz. In eight months there, he had worked his way up to be assistant to the secretary in charge of German correspondence. His original hope in going to Moscow was to continue his studies in preparation for university entrance, and since his work at Otto Deutz left little time for this he resigned and continued his studies under a tutor. (The secondary schooling in Karassan was not sufficient to enter a Russian university directly). After some months of this private study in Moscow he was encouraged to move to St Petersburg where he could more quickly meet the needed requirements. His plan was to enter university and prepare to study medicine. He thought that as a doctor he would be enabled to serve the Lord and his brethren in the Mennonite colonies.

It was in St Petersburg that Cornelius came to know Peter Froese who was studying engineering. They soon discovered that they had similar interests and aspirations, and although Peter was a few years older, they became very close friends. This friendship was interrupted by the First World War but flowered again when they served their brethren together in Moscow in the twenties. Then their paths diverged and it was not until after the Second World War that their friendship was renewed again in West Germany.

With the outbreak of World War I in 1914, Cornelius, who was now twenty, was drafted, and decided in favor of non-combatant work in the Forestry service. After a brief visit home he was shipped off to southern Russia to serve in the Black Forest contingent. Although the visit home was very brief it was a great joy to see his parents again and to spend some time with his brothers and sister. Three more brothers had arrived, John in 1908, Nick in 1910 and Alex in 1912. So now eight year old Jus-tina had ten brothers! This was almost more than she could handle, but during the war she was joined by two sisters, Agatha

in 1915 and Elfrieda in 1917. Later in life Cornelius liked to say that they were a family of ten brothers and each one of them had three sisters!

The Forestry Service, an alternative to military service, was an arrangement the Mennonites worked out with the government back in 1880—but not without considerable upheaval. Already in 1870 Czar Alexander II announced that exemption from military service could no longer be granted and that a policy of Russification would be introduced with the intention of bringing the minority groups into the mainstream of Russian life including service in the Russian army. This shocked the Mennonites and repeated representations were sent to the authorities to see if a satisfactory arrangement for alternative service could be worked out. Despite all this, in 1874 universal conscription was introduced throughout the Russian empire. Many Mennonites took this as the handwriting on the wall that would lead to their total acculturation and suppression, and in the following six years (1874-1880) 18,000 emigrated to America—one third of all Russian Mennonites. The authorities finally relented, however, and offered the Mennonites the Forestry Service as an alternative to military service—with the condition that the Mennonites would pay for the whole operation including construction of the barracks and payment for the food and clothing of the men. Of the 14,000 young men who were drafted during World War I, 7,000 served in these forestry units, while the remainder served in the Army Medical Corps or in the Russian Army itself.

## Chapter 2

# WAR AND REVOLUTION

*"And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars"*  
(Matthew 24:6).

During his first year in the Forestry Camp, Cornelius, because of his physical limitation, worked as a gardener. During his second year he served as a secretary to the Chief Forester. During the third year, which covered the time of the 1917 February Revolution, he was chosen by his comrades to lead their contingent and represent them to the government and at Mennonite conferences. This continued on until the general demobilization of December 1917. The momentous events that took place in Moscow and St Petersburg during this time, events that shook the world, reached them in their remote corner of Russia by radio transmitter and through newspapers and letters. The Mennonites on the whole seemed safe enough in their camps and in their colonies, but the repercussions of what was happening in the capital would finally touch every individual and every aspect of their lives.

What was happening in Russia at this time changed the course of history and has in one way or another affected the lives of us all. It certainly did change things radically for the 100,000 Mennonites of Russia. Under the Czars about 75% of the Russian population was living under conditions of serfdom and oppression—literally until 1861 when the serfs were freed and virtually since then. It was a dictatorship where the Czar controlled the people through the loyalty of the nobility and army to

him, through his firm grip on the police and the Russian Orthodox Church, and through his strong nationalistic policies that repressed the widely divergent ethnic groups that composed the country. In some respects the revolution, when it came, was partly justified. Some of the bright younger Mennonites who had gone to the cities and universities recognized this.

The prosperity of the Mennonite colonies was in sharp contrast to the poverty of the masses. Unfortunately when all the idealism and violence of the Revolution had run its course, about 90% of the population was still oppressed and living in bondage. A Communist dictatorship had replaced the Czarist dictatorship and in the process millions of lives were sacrificed and would yet be sacrificed to the new god.

## Russification

The Mennonite colonies had been tolerated by the Czars; indeed their development had once been encouraged as a possible example of agricultural life for the rest of Russia. They enjoyed their thriving life-style and hence were not among the 70% of the oppressed population crying out for reform. However, Russian toleration of this unusual group was swiftly declining.

Of this period CF writes: "Already before the War an energetic policy of Russification [or Russianization] of the German Colonies was pursued by certain government agencies. The Mennonites were able to resist this policy somewhat because of their strong organizations" (MQR April 1932 25). Their schools, for example, were placed under closer state supervision and Russian was supposed to be the official language of instruction. He goes on to say, however, that "when War broke out, the Russification policy developed into a veritable hate against all German colonists." This led to notorious expropriation and a "merciless policy of destruction." Some of this was official and planned but some of it was a populist xenophobic movement, a natural backlash of the subject classes who were aggravated by the greater progress of the ethnic immigrants, whatever their language or religion.

It was as a result of these pressures that as early as 1916,

the Mennonites had sent a delegation to St Petersburg to try to establish their Dutch ancestry (an issue which would eventually occupy much of CF's attention in Europe). But the pressures on the colonies during the war years helped sow the seeds of the emigration movement. "Already at that time, thought of emigration was seriously considered. The experiences of the War led to a feeling that one was without a homeland and without a father-land" (MQR April 32 69).

As the revolution progressed, the Mennonite colonies were resented not only for their German ethnicity. Now their independence became a threat because of their economic and agricultural success. They were not willing to be swallowed up in the broader sweep of agrarian reforms welcomed by the masses. They had too much to lose and nothing to gain. They were not to be allowed to keep what they had, and the gradual invasion of their life and peace and the eventual destruction of all they held dear began a long process of hardship and suffering for the colonies.

## **Revolutionary Factions**

With the rise of the socialist revolution the people were promised bread, and also freedom from the old repressions of the Czars, the Church and the wealthy landowners. But the reformers were divided amongst themselves between the Social Democratic Party and the Socialist Revolutionary Party.

Both parties called for a socialist revolution, for the overthrow of government controls, for the eradication of capitalism, and a dictatorship of the proletariat—based on universal suffrage (one man, one vote), and the basic freedoms of the press, speech, association, and religion. The Social Democratic Party, that had attracted Lenin and Trotzky among others, split into a majority group, the Bolsheviks, including Lenin, and a minority group, the Mensheviks, including Trotzky. The Bolsheviks adopted revolutionary tactics, whereas the Mensheviks stayed with a more evolutionary approach. The Socialist Revolutionary Party stood for many of the same principles, but had more of a following among students, the intelligentsia and especially among the

peasants. They were numerically the strongest party until they were dislodged by the Bolsheviks in 1918.

The Mennonites were not immediately attracted to such revolutionary politics. They were basically conservative and law-abiding and had initially been loyal to the Czar—especially when they were left alone. Culturally they would have fit in best with the Liberal Party, made up mostly of nobles and professionals. Like their counterparts in European countries these Liberals favored political, economic and social reforms and all the freedoms, but they were more divided on what they would put in the place of the autocracy they opposed. After 1905 the Liberals split into Constitutional Democrats (Kadets) and Octobrists—who were satisfied with the Manifesto put forward by Czar Nicholas on October 30, 1905. One Mennonite delegate sat in the Duma (parliament) at that time.

But the in-fighting amongst those opposing the Czarist regime boded ill for the future. In the years just before World War I, civil unrest and discontent were spreading—strikes were becoming more common, agrarian disturbances were flaring up, student rebellion was rampant, and the number of political assassinations was increasing. In the face of all this turmoil the government remained unchanging, answering only with brutal reprisals.

The contrast between conditions in the country as a whole and conditions in the Mennonite colonies is revealing. The country as a whole was 76% illiterate, whereas the Mennonite colonies, by contrast, enjoyed close to 100% literacy. The country as a whole was painfully inexperienced in self-government, whereas the Mennonite colonies had learned to run their affairs quite efficiently, even if not altogether democratically. Industrialization had also developed in the Mennonite colonies far beyond that of the country as a whole. At one point about 7% of all Russian farm machinery was made in Mennonite factories.

The mobilization of fifteen million Russian men for the War proved to be disastrous for the industry of the country and for agriculture and transportation. There were increased strikes in war factories, and food demonstrations more frequently turned into riots. The authorities seemed unwilling or unable to do anything. Some felt that the demonic influence of Rasputin on the

Imperial family played into all this indecision. He was murdered in December, 1916 and in the following two months Imperial Russia was brought to its knees and finally to extinction. These were the downward steps:

On March 12, 1917 the Czar dissolved the recently convened Duma and ordered the troops to maintain order. But the disillusioned soldiers deserted to the crowds and by evening most government buildings were under revolutionary control. In a last ditch effort the members of the defunct Duma met and chose a thirteen-man Temporary Committee to rule. On the same day and in the same building, the Petrograd Soviet (council) of Workers and Soldiers was also organized. These were the two groups that could try to do something about the chaos that had engulfed the country.

On the next day, March 13, Nicholas II abdicated, first in favor of his son and then in favor of his brother Michael. But it was in vain; neither could have done anything to stem the tide of disorder and revolution.

On March 16 the Temporary Committee became a Provisional Government with Prince Lvov as Premier and Kerensky as deputy chairman of the Soviet and Minister of Justice. It seemed as if the old Czarist administration was disappearing without a struggle. These events reverberated throughout the whole country and were the beginning of administrative, political, military, and economic chaos. How could a Provisional Government committed to moderation and gradualism handle the fact that it had no administrative apparatus to carry out its orders? In most instances the bureaucrats who had run the daily affairs of the country, were out of favor and had abdicated their positions and fled. It was faced also with a losing war, an acute food shortage, a paralyzed transportation system, an empty treasury, and a discontented populace. The peasants were demanding land, the workers were demanding benefits, subject peoples like the Finns, Poles, Ukrainians, Germans were demanding autonomy, and soldiers were demanding the end of hostilities. What a challenge! On top of all this, Russia's allies, the British and the French, were pressing for increased war efforts on Russia's part in their struggle against Germany. What a terrible dilemma for the country; yet by con-

trast how sheltered the Mennonite colonies were from most of these catastrophic happenings. But this was not to last.

As was mentioned above, just at the time of the abdication of the Czar and the outbreak of the revolution, Cornelius was chosen by his brethren in the Forestry Camp to represent them to the government and at Mennonite conferences. Speaking of this time he writes:

In the spring of 1917 our dilapidated government broke down. In consequence of the revolution in February it seemed as though many favorable opportunites were appearing for us. [The Provisional Government, for example, had promised new freedom for all minority groups.] The Mennonites, as all the German colonies, had been strengthened in their will to solidarity by the hard experiences of war-time. The new era opened up new possibilities and gave new challenges. Within a few months after the February revolution we were able to summon an all-Russian Mennonite convention which dealt with the various economic and cultural problems facing our colonies. (MQR 71)

### **The All-Mennonite Congress**

The conference he attended was the All-Mennonite Congress in Ohrloff in August, 1917. The Ohrloff Mennonite Church was founded in 1804 and was the oldest congregation in the Molotschna settlement. It was a rural congregation that served about seven villages in the vicinity. It was the congregation that the well-known Johann Cornies had belonged to, and was the place where the first Mennonite high school (Zentralschule) came into being. The membership reached about 1500 at its peak.

The 141 delegates to this Congress met in the school. At the opening service, Solomon Ediger, a leading Mennonite preacher and teacher, described the political turmoil shaking Russia and challenged the Mennonites to become more united. To resist the pressures that would come upon them, and to make their contribution toward reconstruction, they would have to speak and act with one voice. This was the purpose for calling the Congress. The expenses for the Congress, interestingly enough, were to be covered by the sale of national newspapers made available to the delegates in the vestibule of the school.

The first matter dealt with was the selection of a praesidium. Benjamin H. Unruh was chosen first chairman with his younger

brother, Abram H. Unruh as one of the secretaries. Both became close friends of CF in the years to come— Abram as one of the main leaders among Manitoba MBs and Benjamin as one of the leading brethren among the Mennonites of Germany. This Congress was Benjamin's first meeting with Cornelius and he said later that he was immediately impressed with the seriousness and stature of this young delegate. Although Cornelius was just twenty-three, Unruh felt that the similarity of their convictions on Christian piety and the peace position already drew them together.

As it began its deliberations the Congress had to wrestle with the basic economic questions the new government was raising: the intention to dissolve private property rights. This seemed utter madness to most delegates but it did force them to consider other aspects of land reform, including the redistribution of Crown lands, church lands and large private estates. They would be sub-divided to provide something for the landless class. The goal would be the improvement of the economy and the welfare of the country as a whole. At this point they were trying to respond to the changes and rise to the challenge. How could they adjust the agricultural economy to be more just, and to fit better into a socialist framework?

In light of what has happened since, it is perhaps significant that some of the delegates are described as having socialist leanings. Peter Froese, who later became CF's closest co-worker, was one of the spokesmen for this element. As a young idealistic university student this was largely a theoretical stance. His father was an MB minister in the Memrick settlement, but B.B. Janz mentions that, as a high school student in Halbstadt, Froese took a fairly progressive attitude in the matter of relating more openly and freely with the students from the girls' school. When it came to marriage he chose to marry a Russian Christian girl. The debate at the Congress focussed on the relationship of Christianity to socialism, and Froese took the position that 'Christianity is certainly closer to socialism than it is to capitalism, even though Christianity and socialism are not to be identified.' He finally agreed with the majority at the Congress that for the time being private land ownership was best, but he was not so sure that this would always be the case.

The Congress unanimously supported the idea that a land fund should be organized, drawing on state lands and domains, monastery and church lands, and overly large private estates, and that peasants with no land or not enough land should be helped from this fund. Land taken from the very large estates, they were convinced, should involve compensation to the owners. It was agreed as well that large estates should be taxed more heavily with an aim to a gradual reduction in the size of the larger estates and an increase in the size of the smaller ones. Some of these concepts are clearly progressive in terms of what Mennonites were used to, and represent a new willingness to apply the principles of justice to the country as a whole, even if it was to their own immediate disadvantage. They also agreed to encourage cooperatives and credit unions and organize more agricultural research stations and agricultural colleges. But all of this as it turned out would be too little too late.

The second main report had to do with their organization as Mennonites. They finally agreed to establish a permanent Mennonite Central Office (Mennozentrum) with headquarters in Halbstadt. It was to consist of twenty members and their main responsibility was to carry out the decisions of the Congress with an end to coordinating and unifying the cultural life of all Russian Mennonites. It would also involve some publishing. Benjamin Unruh headed up the list of men chosen. Another responsibility related to the fact that the Mennonite colonies jointly carried the total financial responsibility for the maintenance of the Forestry contingents and also for the support of Mennonites who did enlist in the Russian army, as well as support for their wives and families. This was becoming quite a burden on top of all the other requisitions of foodstuffs and animals by the government. But the economic chaos descending on the country had not hit them too hard yet. At this point they were still able to convene conferences, make trips— even to Europe, operate a Centre in Halbstadt and pay its employees etc.

The question of biblical non-resistance also surfaced at this Congress and the wide divergence represented among the Mennonites was quite evident. The presence at the Congress, of a number of uniformed Mennonite soldiers who had not yet been demobilized, made it clear that for many Russian Mennonites

non-resistance was an historic doctrine that had lost its relevance. This was not true for Cornelius— even though two of his brothers would later join up with the White Army. As a disciple of Christ the command of Jesus to love our enemies had already gripped his heart. It would be put to the test in the months to come, but as we will see, it became even firmer under pressure.

There was still a spirit of optimism evident at the Ohrloff Congress in August 1917, but the events of the November 1917 Revolution changed all that. Of this period CF wrote,

The revolution in November 1917, however, shattered all these plans. Lenin gave to Russia the dictatorship of the proletariat. The revolutionary system, however, was not so readily and easily established. In many regions a wild anarchy set in, especially in South Russia. The bands of anarchists were particularly destructive in our Mennonite villages. It was in that awful time that in one night all the male inhabitants of the village of Einlage in the Molotschna were massacred. What our churches had to endure in those days cannot be described (MQR April 30 70).

The immediate effect this had on all the Mennonite villages and colonies throughout Russia and the Ukraine was that the local self-government they had enjoyed for over a century, came to an abrupt end. With the Revolution all political and economic authority was suddenly put into the hands of local soviets of workers and peasants. These changes were not implemented everywhere at the same rate and with the same immediate consequences, but the change when it came was a fundamental one, and one the Mennonites were never quite able to fit into. These Soviets were made up of the poorer and propertyless elements of society and they used their new power, often ruthlessly, in improving their own economic situation. In one instance, for example, the Chortitza Soviet, demanded a payment of two million rubles from the Mennonite villagers to be paid within three days—and they took several hostages to insure quick compliance.

### **Negotiating with the Authorities**

This is the kind of situation that CF returned to when the Treaty of Brest Litovsk ushered in general demobilization in

December 1917. In his own brief summary of these crucial years he writes,

After I had returned home from my compulsory service, the New Samara colony appointed me as their deputy and gave me the assignment of extricating the Colony from its links with the Bashkir regional government, so that New Samara could be recognized as an independent entity. With this in mind I attended the sessions of the regional Council in Sterlitamak and began negotiations. Just at that time armed Bolsheviks arrived breaking up the meeting, disbanding the Council, and setting up their own Soviet. In spite of all this our request was granted and a separate Mennonite 'Volost' (municipal authority) was established in which my responsibility was with the school system in the colony (Biographical Sketch 5).

He would soon find out that this was a temporary concession. In the long run Mennonite independence would not be tolerated.

These negotiations in Sterlitamak occupied most of the winter months. Then in April of 1918 the colony asked Cornelius to go to Moscow to establish contact with the German embassy there. While he was in Moscow, civil war was erupting in many parts of Russia, and news reached him that the route back to New Samara was cut off by Czechoslovak troops. At just this time his negotiations at the Embassy were interrupted by the assassination of the German ambassador, Count Mirbach. What could he do but risk the return trip home? On the way, however, he was suddenly detained and arrested and threatened with being shot. Amidst confusion among the leaders Cornelius was able to slip away from his captors and escape back to his home in Donskoj. How he praised God with his family for his deliverance.

By November 1918 the municipal Council in New Samara had been liquidated by the Bolsheviks. So again Cornelius was assigned to represent the colonies' interests in Sterlitamak— and again he was successful in negotiating an independent Council for the Colony. But the Bashkir republic with headquarters in Sterlitamak was always at the mercy of changes in Moscow, so New Samara sent Cornelius to Moscow to try to assure continued protection and recognition for the colony.

In Moscow Cornelius was able to move in with his friend Peter Froese who had a little room in the Red Cross warehouse

which was on the circumference of the city on what was known as Vladimirski Chausee. Through Peter he found out about the "United Council of Religious Societies and Groups" that had received official recognition in January 1919. It was made up of friends and followers of Tolstoy as well as evangelicals (Stundists) and Baptists. Chertkov, a personal friend of Tolstoy, had gone to Lenin, who was known to respect Tolstoy and his philosophy, assuring him of their respect for human authority and a strong conscience against shedding human blood. Lenin himself had their authorization as a Council cleared through the Central Executive Committee of the Communist Party, so that they would be the central organ through which religious matters would be channeled to the government.

These men were impressed with Froese and Klassen who were elected to the Executive Board. This 'United Council' was legally recognized and was granted the right to appear before the court as expert counsel in all cases of trial of those who refused military service. The 'United Council' in those darkest years of anarchy, succeeded with the help of God in preserving thousands of young men from the worst, and in saving very many from death by execution. Naturally, the energetic work of the Council soon became very obnoxious to the Bolsheviks, who set up a remarkable five day trial against the members of the Council and dissolved the Council. The rich archive of the 'United Council' was confiscated and has been almost totally lost. This archive, which unmasked the whole phraseology of the Bolsheviks about the 'model' freedom of conscience enjoyed by every citizen of the Soviet State, had to be destroyed (MQR 71). It was through the Council that Cornelius was able to assure the protection and independence of New Samara from abuse by local Soviets. This privileged position of the Council did not last long however. The Soviet leaders soon realized that this arrangement was not in the best interest of their atheistic egalitarian position.

### **Chaos in the Ukraine**

While Cornelius was in Moscow the Mennonite villages in the Ukraine were going through a veritable hell. These people,

and what they endured, would become a part of CF's life and ministry through to the end of his days, so it is important to understand their situation. With the Treaty of Brest Litovsk, Lenin lost temporary control of the Ukraine. A Ukrainian brand of Communism was trying to assert control there, but it wasn't without a struggle. With the Bolshevik takeover and the organization of local Soviets, the mills and local businesses began to be taken over by the government. The Red Guard began ruthless requisitioning of food stuff, horses and other livestock, clothing and currency. Unreasonable grain deliveries to the mills were ordered.

In March 1918 the German army moved into the area where the Mennonites lived and the banditry and requisitioning was restrained for eight months. The colonies appreciated the German presence since it meant relief from some of the chaos and bloodshed that had broken loose after the Revolution. The presence of the German soldiers, however, encouraged a militaristic spirit of self-protection ('Selbstschutz') and armed resistance among some of the Mennonites. But when the German army was driven out in November 1918 this collaboration of the Mennonites and other German-speaking Russians with the German Army infuriated the local Russian populace. One of the most notorious leaders that sought to take revenge on the Mennonites was Nestor Makhno. He had once worked for a German-speaking farmer and hadn't been treated that well. Now with his robber army he was merciless in his attacks on the Mennonite villagers for a period of six weeks until the White Army forces moved into the area. The 'Selbstschutz' action by a small group of Mennonites during those six weeks was done in cooperation with some of the German Lutheran and German Catholic farmers, and later was encouraged by elements from the White Army of General Denikin.

In one instance these 'Selbstschutz' troops, including some Mennonites, shot and killed some of their attackers. Not long after, beginning in March 1919, Makhno took his revenge, and all of those involved were killed, plus many more. A revolutionary tribunal of the Red Army sat at Melitopol at this time and every week hundreds of death sentences were passed— also on some Mennonites. This went on until June, when the White Army occupied the area again for the summer months. By late September the Whites were driven out and a period of unprecedented

plunder, violence and rape followed, as well as heavy requisitioning of grain and livestock and forced shelter and feeding of soldiers. From December 1919 to July 1920 the Red Army maintained control of the Ukraine but then from July to September the battle line between the Red and White armies moved back and forth—changing as much as twelve times in one Mennonite village. The unhygienic conditions of that time brought a typhus epidemic with it in the fall of 1920 and, as it turned out, more of the Mennonite colonists died of typhus than of war and anarchy. This then led right into the severe drought of the spring of 1921 and to the ensuing crop failures, and widespread famine from the spring of 1921 through to the fall of 1922.

When the Bolsheviks finally regained full control of the Ukraine by late 1920, the impression they had was that the Ukrainian Mennonites were supporters of counter-revolution. This impression was strengthened by the wealth and privilege Mennonites had enjoyed, and by their religious nonconformity, use of the German language and refusal to bear arms. How could such a minority possibly be assimilated into the Russian Communist way of life. A Communist official summed up the Mennonite predicament as follows, "We (Communists) do not move against the masses, but with them. These masses are against you (Mennonites). If we give you the land (which you have possessed for 130 years) the neighboring Russians will continue to destroy and murder. What shall we do then? We simply cannot help you. We must reckon with the masses." (*Lost Fatherland* 110).

By winter 1919/1920 CF was back in Sterlitamak representing not only the interests of New Samara but also those of the thirty-seven villages of the Orenburg colony. But these were days of uncertainty and rapid unforeseen changes. Suddenly in the spring of 1920 the Bashkirs were out of favor once more in Moscow and their government was dissolved again for being too liberal and independent. All those objecting were arrested. Since CF had spent so much time there with the authorities, his life too was endangered, so he went into hiding for a few months working for his room and board in a cheese factory in Old Samara.

It was in July 1920 that representatives of many of the Mennonite colonies outside the Ukraine met in Davlekanovo in the

province of Ufa. CF and Karl Friedricksen, a local teacher and evangelist, chaired the Conference. It was the first meeting of its kind since the Revolution of November 1917 and is remembered particularly because it called into being the 'Menno Centre in Moscow. It was created to look after the interests of Mennonites from eastern Russia and Siberia—about two-fifths of the Mennonites of Russia. The Conference also asked Peter Froese and Cornelius to take charge of the Centre.

It was not long after, that a general amnesty was declared for all those who had been active in the Bashkir government in Sterlitamak. On hearing this news Cornelius immediately left for Moscow. For the time being it was back into the little room in the Red Cross warehouse, where Peter had part-time employment.

## Chapter 3

### FAMINE AND RELIEF

*"I was hungry and you gave me food... I was naked and you clothed me" (Matthew 25:35).*

Meanwhile the situation for the Mennonites in the Ukraine was even more desperate than for those in eastern Russia, and it was worsening. As we have seen the Civil War and Makhno's ravaging had caused untold havoc. Hundreds had been brutally raped and murdered and the survivors had lost everything either to the harsh requisitioning of the local Soviets or to the plundering of the armies and bandits. A typhus epidemic had also taken hundreds of lives. In addition there had been a total crop failure and the colonies were hopelessly overcrowded with refugees from the surrounding devastated area. To all this was added the drought that began in the spring of 1921 and lasted until the fall of 1922. This was the beginning of what became known as the great famine of 1921-22. Conditions were so bad throughout the whole country that Lenin and his comrades were forced to drop 'war communism,' the strict ideology of the war period, in favor of the New Economic Policy (NEP) which did at least allow for a minimum of private business initiative.

In the midst of all this suffering, many letters were written to fellow Mennonites in the United States and Canada describing the desperate famine conditions and crying for help. A three member Study Commission led by Benjamin Unruh had also left for Europe and America in January of 1920 with an aim to inform their brethren of the crisis they were in and to solicit help.

These appeals, as it turned out, played directly into the forming of what has become well-known as the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC)—a result of meetings of representative Mennonites in Elkhart, Indiana in July 1920. At these meetings the decision was made to send Professor Alvin Miller and two others to Russia to try to open the doors for American Mennonite Relief.

## MCC Arrives

It was in the spring of 1921 that Froese and Klassen heard that the American Mennonite Relief representative Alvin Miller was in Constantinople trying to get into Russia. The Russians however were blocking his entry so Cornelius tried his utmost in the Foreign Office to get a pass for himself to travel to Constantinople. Finally Litvinov, one of the deputies in the Foreign Office, promised to provide the pass. As it turned out CF was never able to use it.

In the summer of 1921 an All-Russian Relief Committee was organized under the chairmanship of Leo Kamenev, who headed up the government's Central Commission for Combating Famine. This committee was made up of some influential university men and former government officials. Klassen and Froese were also chosen to be members of the committee and it seemed that a legal basis for some good work was being laid; but in short order their hopes were crushed. Some government officials became envious of the Committee's success and suddenly in mid-August the Committee was dissolved by the dreaded 'Cheka,' the Communist Secret Police, and most of the members were arrested and imprisoned.

Klassen and Froese were put into solitary confinement in the notorious Lubjanka prison, and Cornelius' brother Henry, who happened to be at the meeting as a representative of Quaker Relief, was thrown into a common cell along with the others. These were frightening days and nights, for they knew that many that had been imprisoned there had never been seen again. After about ten days of intensive interrogation, (during which time they found out that Tolstoy's daughter and the famous author Maxim Gorky were also in there with them), they were released, to their

great relief. Many prayers had been offered up for them during this time.

On the day of Cornelius' release, Saturday, August 27, 1921, Alvin Miller arrived in Moscow. However, they did not become aware of this for a few days. Finding each other was no easy matter "for the very atmosphere was charged with fear and suspicion, and all foreigners were suspect" (Miller 173). In a city of over one and a half million, 'turned upside down by revolution' Miller didn't have the help of a city directory or telephone directory. He couldn't even use the telephone inquiry system since he didn't speak Russian. All normal mail deliveries were in chaos and in the atmosphere of mistrust and suspicion normal routes of questioning or inquiry were extremely dangerous. Simple requests were often misconstrued leading to arrests on charges of conspiracy. Eventually, in an almost miraculous manner, Miller made contact with a Baptist by the name of Pavlov, who was able to make a phone contact with the Red Cross building where Froese worked. A letter sent by Miller from Rostov by confidential courier had reached Froese and Klassen and they were already acquainted with the work in the south.

The next morning the meeting between these brethren, Froese and Miller, heretofore unknown to one another, yet now united in a common task of mercy, took place at the Savoy Guest House where Miller was staying. Miller describes his meeting with CF's close friend Froese,

As I came near the stairway, I observed a man approaching whose features were noticeably different from those of the people with whom I had now for some time been dealing. It was neither a Russian (Slavic) nor a Hebrew face. Neither could he be of the foreign group in the Savoy, for his clothing was not foreign. His face was lighted up and full of expectation. We realized, each of us, that we were looking at each other intently, uncertain whether to speak or not, yet each feeling that this was the man. Then he greeted me in German, and we were at once acquainted. It was Peter Franz Froese.

There were many things to discuss; my plans; what had been accomplished thus far; how best to proceed. He was a well read man, had studied in the higher schools in Germany, knew history, and was able to stand aside and look at the volcanic upheaval in Russia in an objective way, as something almost inevitable follow-

ing the abuses of the old regime. Yet he had a sympathetic understanding and fine appreciation of all things Russian. In the course of five years of close cooperation with him I was to learn more of his high idealism, his enduring perseverance, and unfaltering courage and faith (Miller 175-6).

Not feeling peaceful about an extended conversation at the Savoy, they quickly moved to Froese's quarters four miles out of the city "on the road over which the exiles banished to Siberia by the Czars used to shuffle along with chains on their feet, starting on the long journey to the far away frontiers of civilization beyond the Ural mountains" (Miller 176). It was here that Miller met Klassen for the first time. Of both, Miller writes,

both Froese and Klassen were young in years but old in experience... Klassen was a man of distinguished appearance and had just come home from prison... Froese and Klassen were admirably suited for their task. It is doubtful whether two other men could have been found among all the Russian Mennonites who would have been able to do the work required, and endure its nerve-racking strain as did these two young men. Their achievements are monumental. And yet in spite of all the hard fought struggle with government leaders, with malicious underlings, with dissensions also among their own groups, they have remained courageously at their posts continuously as representatives of the Mennonites during more than eight years— when even the Communist Party leadership shifted and broke, sending some of the most prominent former government officials into exile" (Miller 176-8).

Miller also gives a revealing description of Moscow of that time,

Everywhere in the city were the evidences of the revolutionary upheaval— streets in bad condition, sidewalks worn out, rubbish and refuse strewn about, buildings generally dilapidated, houses a heap of ruins, here and there the gaunt skeleton of a bombarded dwelling like the quarters of the Kadets on the Tverskaya Boulevard. All the stores and shops were closed as were also the banks. A few buildings were used by the government as distributing centers, many as offices, many were empty and boarded shut. With fewer dwellings and a larger population, Moscow was over-filled, therefore the house or room space per person was fixed by law. Small families were crowded into one or two small rooms where they all cooked, ate, slept, and lived together. Central heating systems or Dutch stoves were generally out of repair and required too much fuel. Rough brick furnaces were built into the

rooms on fine hardwood floors; or stoves set up with the pipe thrust through the window pane or through a rude hole cut into the wall. Occasionally tram cars passed slowly by, but they were only for the workers—and only for those workers who had tram permits or passes. Of such there were many more than the cars could accommodate. Many people shabbily dressed and emaciated wandered listlessly about on the streets. An atmosphere of suffering and hopelessness pervaded the city. The absorbing concern of each was where to find the next meal. Overshadowing this was the haunting dread of the Bolshevik secret service—‘Cheka’ [later GPU and KGB]. In sharp contrast to the populace was the assurance and conscious purposiveness of the Bolsheviks, who toiled tirelessly to achieve the goals set for the revolution (Miller 134).

## **Surveying the Needs**

One of the first things that Froese and Klassen did was send off a telegram to B.B. Janz down in Kharkov informing him of Miller's arrival in Moscow. He made his way by train up to the capital as quickly as possible. He met Miller at Froese and Klassen's apartment where they had long discussions into the night bringing each other up to date on conditions among Mennonites in different parts of the country and the full extent of the famine. The big question, of course, was how soon American Mennonite Relief help could be channeled to the different colonies. While they were together they worked out a plan. As soon as Miller had arranged a relief permission contract with the government in Moscow he would come down to Kharkov to work one out for the Ukraine. With the completion of this stage, he would return to Riga and Berlin to make arrangements for the relief goods to be shipped over from North America. It was agreed that, while Miller was in Europe, Klassen would make an extensive trip to as many of the Mennonite colonies outside the Ukraine as possible to gain first-hand information about the famine, assess the needs, and set up some local organizations to coordinate the relief efforts. Janz would do the same thing in the Ukraine.

On December 3, 1921 Miller finally returned to Moscow from Berlin, but it wasn't until December 15 that Klassen returned from his tour. This trip undoubtedly made a profound impression on CF. It was a gruesome sight indeed and a dramatic contrast to the happy years of his childhood in the prosperous years

of the colonies when it seemed that God's blessing was upon their lives. Now, in the Samara Gubernia (state) he found nothing but famine and death. Many villages were deserted, their thatched roofs torn off in an attempt to keep livestock alive and fed. Some people had tried to flee the villages but had died along the road-sides. Many were forced to eat tree bark, straw and various wild animals like rats, gophers and crows or even domestic pets like cats and dogs. The starving hordes would beg from house to house crying for 'Bread in God's Name.'

In each village CF visited the scene was the same, and as he travelled east as far as Orenburg conditions worsened. The bleakness of the scene was only accentuated by the extreme winter conditions for his journey. The horse-drawn sled often lost its way in the snowy track. Once when they seemed completely lost and were facing a night out in the blizzard CF and his driver wandered helplessly in the snow far off the beaten track. Suddenly and miraculously—a sure answer to their desperate cry to God for help—they saw a light and discovered a Mennonite home that gave them welcome shelter for the night.

The first-hand exposure to the needs of the colonies that this trip afforded CF led to the following relief allocations being designated immediately on his return to Moscow: December 19, \$1000 for the Old and New-Samara colonies, and \$300 for the Davlekanovo group near Ufa; December 27, \$1000 for the Orenburg settlement. By the end of December 1921 delivery orders had been made for Koeppenthal of \$1500, New-Samara \$3000, Old-Samara \$1000, Orenburg \$3000 and Ufa \$500. These sums seem small by today's standards, but at that time for \$10, US American Mennonite Relief could supply 49 pounds of white flour, 25 pounds of rice, 15 pounds of sugar, 10 pounds of lard, 3 pounds of tea, and twenty tins of condensed milk (by 1990 prices almost the equivalent of \$100 US). When it was all over the total value of food and clothing contributed by Mennonites of America for Russian Relief was \$1,292,825.

For CF, the opportunity to work together with Alvin Miller and the American Relief operation, at this crucial hour of the Russian brethren's need, was deeply satisfying. It gave him a taste of the way that brotherhood can work—a solidarity of fellowship which can span oceans and continents with the love of God and

the outstretched arm of mercy and compassion.

The task of distributing the food was a monumental one. The food supplies were stored in American Relief Administration (ARA) warehouses often as much as fifty miles distant from the starving villagers. The odds against the work were enormous. Weather conditions were the worst possible; there were snow and blizzards and many miles of uncleared roads. Men and horses were weak; the danger of banditry and the raiding of food shipments were very high. The only safety was in numbers, so caravan travel was imperative. As the fathers of households ventured out to obtain the food, starving fearful families stayed at home and prayed for the protection of their loved ones and the safe delivery of the precious freight—food for the hungry.

Christmas 1921—and what a Christmas that proved to be for many! The food shipments meant the difference between life and death. Just weeks before he had witnessed their extremity and their despair. Now God had made a way for them to receive the necessities for life and survival. He had seen the little children with pinched and sober faces. There were no dreams of sugar plums here as Christmas approached. Just incredulous wide eyes as they saw their aged grandparents and emaciated parents weep over the flour provided by their Mennonite brothers from far-away America. He had himself experienced the hazards of travel through blizzard and snow. He could now appreciate the far greater danger of lonely snow-swept roads where weak fathers braved the elements and hostile attacks to bring the food through to their loved ones. How long those journeys would be with weak and failing horses. How long they would seem to the anxious ones at home.

CF describes one visit he made to a grateful family.

On this trip I came to a family with many children. Mother and father had faces and limbs swollen from hunger, the children were emaciated. The mother had already mixed some dough and the oldest girl was trying to make a fire in the stove which had not been heated for a long time and therefore smoked quite a bit. At last the fire caught and the mother put the dish with the dough on the stove with considerable ceremony, and put the first biscuits into the pan in which some American lard had been melted. The children all stood around the stove. The mother could not restrain

the tears of gratitude which rolled freely down over her cheeks and dropped onto the stove. But the eyes of the children! Those looks I will never forget. I could not contain my feelings any longer and slipped out of the house quietly. In the eyes of the children I read that all the dollars, gilders, and marks which had been given were bearing interest, an interest of which the givers had no conception. The whole relief work of our foreign congregations was a demonstration of love (MQR 73).

Mercifully, many of the shipments got through before Christmas, probably more swiftly because of the prayers of the brethren in the USA who had sent them, and the workers in Moscow who had dispatched them so promptly. If ever there were odds CF faced them here. Yet God proved his arm is not shortened if men cooperate in His acts of mercy.

The Mennonites in the Ukraine were not as fortunate. The bureaucratic bungling of permits between Moscow, the Ukraine and ARA caused delays which prevented the food from reaching them more promptly. Alvin Miller, defying the authorities' refusal of a permit, finally went by train to the Mennonite settlements there, accompanied by Peter Froese who could assist him and also serve as interpreter. The desperate human need they witnessed would remain with them for life.

It wasn't until March 1922 that the first relief kitchens began operating in the Ukraine, and it wasn't until May that they were in full swing everywhere. They were feeding about 25,000 people per month at the height of the operation. With limited supplies it was a real challenge to work things out as fairly as possible. The children and the aged were helped first and then others in so far as there was enough to go around. Wherever the feeding was carried on there was no discrimination—all who came were fed regardless of their ethnic background or religion. Thousands were rescued from sure starvation during the spring, summer and fall of 1922, both in the Ukraine and in other colonies.

One revealing incident shared by CF's brother Henry, illustrates the desperation of the starving colonies, yet CF's profound concern for the testimony of the Mennonite people. An unfortunate episode took place in the Old-Samara colony in April, 1922. In one of the villages some Bashkirs and a few Mennonites were caught in a large stealing operation. The men in the village were so outraged they took justice into their own hands and

flogged the culprits so mercilessly that two of the Bashkirs died. When one of the Mennonite school teachers protested publicly, he was threatened and intimidated by a late night visit from some of the village toughs. The chairman of the local municipal council, a prominent Mennonite, was aware of the incident but said nothing. When CF visited the Colony and urged them to meet and deal with the problem they refused. On his return to Moscow he wrote a letter on May 27 directed to all those involved in which he exhorted them in God's name to deal with the matter. He appealed to them to repent and to make restitution, and spelled out what some of the evil consequences of inaction could be, both for their relationship to the Bashkirs and the future of the relief and emigration program.

A meeting was called on June 7 in which the chairman of the council openly confessed his negligence and cowardice and asked his brothers for forgiveness. The culprits also came forward, acknowledged their guilt, and agreed to turn themselves in to the state authorities. (HFK 19)

### **Organizing Relief in the Colonies**

The rescue operation spearheaded by American Mennonite Relief was a great help, but the Russian Mennonites knew that if they wanted to get back on their feet once more they would have to organize themselves and take some aggressive action. In the spring of 1921 in the Ukraine, the 'Verband Buerger Hollaendischer Herkunft' (Union of Citizens of Dutch Lineage, usually called 'the Verband') came into being, with B.B. Janz as its chief architect and chairman—although the official recognition and registration didn't come until April 1922. It is clear from the charter that its basic thrust was the restoration of the Ukrainian Mennonite colonies to their former level of economic prosperity—through education, the maintenance of welfare institutions, and the revitalization of agriculture. It was also committed to emigration. Already in December of 1921 they requested permission for refugee and landless Mennonites to emigrate, their reasoning being that this would alleviate the intensity of the famine and ensure a future livelihood for the remaining colonists.

In the wake of the famine of 1921/1922 the agricultural and economic condition of the Mennonite colonies was very low. The impact of the famine, death of many male leaders, raids and banditry, government quotas etc., all left their mark on the villages and farms. Some began to feel that the only solution was to seek for another homeland in North or South America where peace and a quiet agricultural life would be guaranteed.

Because the devastation and suffering were greater in the Ukraine, there was a greater sense of urgency there that their only real hope was emigration. As early as February 1922, at a meeting in Ohrloff, the villagers unanimously decided in favor of emigration. B.B. Janz became their leader and spokesman, and he was the first to submit 300 names to the authorities for clearance to leave the country. The response from the authorities was encouraging. As long as they have proof that some country will receive them, they can go. Paraguay had given consent a year previously so on that basis, exit passes were granted—on the assumption that they would leave by way of Odessa and the Black Sea.

In the meantime Benjamin Unruh and the Canadian Mennonite Board of Colonization (usually referred to as 'the Board') were negotiating with the Canadian government and the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR), and on August 22, 1922 word came through, to B.B. Janz's delight, that Canada would receive 3,000 Russian Mennonite refugees. This was when CF and Peter Froese were drawn into the negotiations. The sailings, however, wouldn't be quite as straight forward as the emigrants hoped. To leave from a northern port they would have to pass through Russian territory, as opposed to Ukrainian, and would, consequently, have to get clearance from Moscow, not just Kharkov.

On September 22, 1922 Klassen and Froese went to Smidovich of the Central Executive Committee and he gave his guarded approval, if three conditions would be met: 1) That Canada would guarantee that they would not compel any to return to Russia, 2) That payment for the journey across Russia be paid in advance, and 3) That clearance with the GPU (secret police) and the Commissariat for Foreign Affairs be arranged. This sounded a little more ominous than the first blanket approval.

On October 14 Klassen and Froese met with A.R. Owens, the CPR deputy in Moscow, who assured them that two ships with a capacity of 2,647 were ready in England and would come at a moment's notice. On November 9, however, Klassen and Froese had to break the bad news to Janz that Russia was barring entry into the country to the Canadian Immigration department doctors who would be needed to clear the refugees, and that consequently there would be no movement before spring. This was a great disappointment to Janz and for those who had liquidated all their belongings in preparation for a speedy departure. Fortunately American Mennonite Relief was able to help them survive the winter.

While these negotiations for emigration were proceeding, Klassen and Froese were working hard organizing an agricultural society to work at economic reconstruction in the eastern colonies. CF could not accept the death sentence on the once thriving colonies. His optimistic nature and dogged persistence in the face of obstacles and difficulties, told him that recovery was possible if only some of the former measures could be utilized again. These were hard work, good planning and organization, and a pulling together as a brotherhood with all the available resources. Surely with God's help the colonies could again flourish and even serve as a renewed example of the blessing and prosperity God could give to an ordered way of life that honored Him. Perhaps one of the hardest lessons of CF's life was to watch his hopes and dreams crumble, and though he gave his very best energies and service to the prospect of revitalizing the life of the colonies, his efforts were doomed to eventual failure.

Such experiences mould the characters of God's leaders. Success is not always the best teacher, nor the raw material for the forging of character traits that prepare one for greater challenges ahead. In the Russia of the twenties CF learned to look heartbreak and despair in the face, to adjust and readjust to the adverse blows of circumstances and conditions beyond his control; whether in nature (famine and winter) or in politics (the groundswell of the revolution). 'Gott kann' was no idle motto on the lips of an optimist, it was the deep affirmation of faith of one learning to survive knowing that "nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, neither tribulation, nor distress,

nor persecution, nor famine, nor nakedness, nor peril, nor the sword" (Romans 8:35).

## Chapter 4

### AFTERMATH AND RECONSTRUCTION

*"Fear not little flock, it is the Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom . . . (Luke 12:32).*

As already noted, a mood of optimism carried the day in 1922 as CF threw himself into efforts to restore the declining life of the colonies. With hind-sight it can be observed that such optimism was ill-placed. A realist might have seen that the devastation inflicted on the Mennonite colonies would be lasting and that no rebirth of the old life style would be possible. Political, economic, social and cultural upheaval had taken too great a toll. And the spiritual resilience of the settlements was at a low ebb. Yet perhaps in the midst of events, CF could only recall the challenges to faith and hard work of earlier heroes like Cornies in a bygone era. At any rate he redoubled his efforts to rescue his people, doomed though they seemed to be. In the early months of 1922 he threw himself wholeheartedly, as only he could, into the negotiations for the Agricultural Union.

Some preliminary efforts at organizing outside the Ukraine were also afoot: a co-op to improve seed grains was organized in Old-Samara under Herman Riesen's direction, and in Koeppenthal (am Trakt) under Johannes J. Dyck's leadership (the father of CF's future brother-in-law, Peter J. Dyck). In the Caucasus

(Kuban) a co-op was also organized under the leadership of Franz Isaak, C.A. DeFehr, and Jacob Reimer. It was in the summer of 1922 that Klassen and Froese, having witnessed the sad state to which farming had declined, especially in the Volga colonies, began to discuss the possibility of organizing a Mennonite agricultural society.

### **The All-Russian Mennonite Agricultural Union**

This led to a conference in October 1922 in Alexandertal in Old Samara, where representatives appeared from New Samara, Askadak, Barnaul, Kuban, Trakt, Turkestan and Ufa. Here it was agreed that Froese and Klassen together with Franz Isaak should draw up a charter, working out the legal details so that it could be approved by the government. The spiritual aspects would have to be played down as much as possible so that it would appear to be primarily an agricultural and economic venture that could help the country as a whole to recover. A month later the organizational committee met and drew up a charter organizing it as a society ('Verein,' i.e. as opposed to a 'Verband') so that branches could be formed wherever necessary.

Back in Moscow Klassen and Froese presented the document first to Peter Smidovich, one of the leading communists on the Central Executive Committee. He was one of the older revolutionaries, a man whose hair had already turned white, who had spent a lot of time in Czarist prisons in the years before the revolution. In prison he had served time alongside Baptists and other evangelical Christians imprisoned for their faith. Although his convictions were diametrically opposed to theirs he did get to know them and understand them. He knew what the Mennonites represented and realized that destroying the colonies would contribute further to the economic ruin of the country. He was obviously an intelligent man and asked some very incisive questions about the state of things in the colonies. He then passed the document on to the People's Commissar for Agriculture. The first hurdle had been overcome.

It passed through this department with just a few minor alterations, but it wasn't quite so simple when it got to the Depart-

ment of the Interior. They insisted the Justice Department had to approve it as well, so it was passed on to P.A. Krassikov, with whom Klassen and Froese had had some heated discussions earlier on the non-resistance question. Klassen writes,

Although he could be very hard and sarcastic, we sensed that he respected us for our openness and our strong convictions. He told us that the Soviet Government couldn't possibly tolerate a religious organization even if it had significant economic functions. He sensed rightly that the Mennonites were basically a religious movement, but when he asked, 'Who are the Mennonites anyway?'—the breakthrough came. We said that the Mennonites are descendants of immigrants from Holland and Germany. 'Well why didn't you say that?' And when we did, that seemed to satisfy him, and he approved the proposal and so did the Department of the Interior. Having gone this whole route and having taken over four months, it was finally passed by the Central Executive Committee on May 16, 1923, and included in part II of Laws and Regulations of the Workers and Peasants Government. It was a great triumph for us because it now became the legal basis on which our work for the Mennonites could proceed and grow." (Toews Select 198)

Cornelius' love for his people and his loyalty are quite evident from the opening paragraph of his report on the founding of the Society,

Even though we are just a little flock, as Mennonites, with manifest weaknesses, there is a healthy kernel there of those who still trust God, and even when courage flounders there is a pulling together that draws on help from above—and does that with a tenacity that is at times truly astounding. Hasn't the truth of this been evident in the last years? Yes indeed! Even in the darkest of times the kernel of faith was evident. When famine entered our homes, our little flock of Mennonites did not lose heart. Friends from overseas heard our cry for help, and praise God, most of us survived death by starvation.

Even the desire to emigrate is not based on despair; but at its best proves that we will endure any hardship in order to survive and press on. On the other hand we realized that not all would be able to leave. To accomplish this was far beyond our means. And then the word that came to us was 'reconstruction.' The economic disaster that has hit us can and must be overcome. This great challenge absorbs all our energies. As we rise to meet it today we will give it our untiring dedication. (Toews Select 199-200)

We were well aware of the fact that without organizing there was no way forward. So the 'All-Russischer Mennonitischer Landwirtschaftlicher Verein' (All-Russian Mennonite Agricultural Society) had to come into being—later referred to as the A.M.L.V. or just 'the Verein.' The birth wasn't an easy one, but our little flock of Mennonite people will come to appreciate it all the more because of this." Cornelius closes the report with this prayer, "And now may God grant our little flock of Mennonites much grace in solving the problems that lie ahead of us (Toews Select 203).

None of them fully realized how grievous those problems could be. But having survived the great War, the banditry, the devastation of the Civil War, the typhus epidemic, and the famine, there was now hope that the general situation would gradually improve.

### **First Congress of the A.M.L.V.**

The crops were better in the summer and fall of 1923 and the American Mennonite Relief operation was gradually able to cut back in its relief efforts. There was considerable excitement when the delegates arrived in Alexandertal in October 1923 for the first general Congress of the AMLV. Franz Isaak, who later became the pastor of CF's little MB church in North End Winnipeg, was the chairman of the Organization Committee and officially opened the Congress. Alvin Miller was present and expressed his joy at being with them and brought warm greetings from Mennonite brothers and sisters in America. Cornelius also greeted the delegates on behalf of the Menno Center and reminded them that it was not only the economic crisis in the country that was bringing them together but also the "will to work, to put shoulders to the task" (Toews Select 219).

Jacob Reimer from the Kuban was chosen as the first chairman and Franz C. Thiessen from Davelakanovo as one of the secretaries. Next they agreed to send the following telegram to the Kremlin: "To Central Executive Committee member P.G. Smidovich: the first Congress of delegates of the AMLV, which has chosen you as honorary chairman, greets the Soviet government, and declares that they support as much as possible the efforts of the government toward agricultural reconstruction." (Toews Select 221) Another telegram was sent to the MCC in America:

"The first Congress of delegates of the AMLV is asking Prof. Miller to extend to the Mennonites of the USA and Canada their warmest greetings and heartfelt thanks" (Toews 221).

It was Peter Froese who reported to the delegates on behalf of the Organization Committee, made up of Isaak, Klassen and himself, describing their efforts in drawing up the document and seeing it through the government departments until its approval in May.

Franz Isaak described the efforts of the three of them in Moscow in finding a more suitable location out of which to work. They finally found an abandoned theatre which the City Council agreed to rent to them if they would undertake the remodeling. With funds as scarce as they were it would not have been possible without the help of Alvin Miller and AMR. It consisted of eight rooms on the second floor of the building and was particularly suitable because, besides housing Froese and Klassen, there was also room for other delegates and emigrants passing through Moscow. It had been agreed a year prior to this that every member of the AMLV would donate the equivalent of a pound of wheat per acre to undergird the operations of the Society and its executive. The staples in the diet at the Menno Center were the roasted buns and millet porridge that Franz Isaak solicited from the colonies out east.

On the second day of the proceedings, Cornelius, who had been on loan to Alvin Miller and AMR, was asked to give a brief survey of the work of AMR among Mennonites and the larger population. It was clear to him that any recovery of life among the colonies was built on the foundation of the work of AMR. In reviewing their work since the Fall of 1921, he was acknowledging this debt. He said, "It would take us too far afield if I should review for you the horrors of the 1921-22 famine. For those who went through it the details are indelibly impressed on their memories. The gruesome aspects needn't be rehearsed here but we do want to remind ourselves of the great help the AMR extended to us. The following statistics will bear that out:

*Feeding the Hungry*—This began in the Volga settlements in December 1921, but couldn't commence in the Ukraine due to bureaucratic delays until March 1922. The number that was fed rose steadily reaching a peak of 38,650 in June. By August 1,

1923 a total of 402,644 people were fed, which averages out at 19,200 per month over a period of twenty months. These statistics speak for themselves, and if we have eyes to see the suffering and joy behind them, the extent of it overwhelms us.

*Tractor Work*—At the same time that the feeding operation was going on tractors were being brought over by AMR—twenty-five in the fall of 1922 and twenty-five more in the spring of 1923. These fifty tractors, with only a few interruptions due to the inaccessibility of fuel, cultivated 17,500 acres of land. Most of this was land that farmers had been forced to neglect for a number of years. Here was true reconstruction work, thanks to Operation Tractor.

*Clothing Supplies*—Approximately twelve box cars of used clothing, underwear, and footwear were brought over by AMR, for distribution in the colonies. Many families that had been reduced to rags and tatters could be properly and warmly clad again. And remember that wherever help was offered it was given indiscriminately to Mennonite and non-Mennonite alike.

*Packages of Supplies*—Thousands of these valuable packages were sent by American Mennonites to Russia through Herbert Hoover's American Relief Administration. From the Molotschna and Chortitza colonies they were forwarded on to Mennonites in the remotest corners of Russia through the AMR—and what a blessing they were!

*Relief for Slavgorod and Pavlodar*—These Mennonite colonies in Siberia issued an urgent appeal to AMR for seed grain in the spring of 1923. Director Miller immediately issued \$5,000 worth of seed grain to these needy farmers, on the condition that they repay it in the fall. Slavgorod, however, had a total crop failure this summer and the need there is becoming truly desperate. AMR came through again for them with a \$5,000 supply of oats, which will be a great help.

*Charitable Institutions*—Most of our institutions (Schools for the Deaf, Hospitals etc.) in the Ukraine were supported by AMR both with food and clothing. Without this help some would not have been able to continue to operate.

*Mennonite Center in Moscow*—The Organization Committee and the delegates from Moscow have already mentioned the substantial help that AMR has extended to our Center. (Toews Select 224-

Then Cornelius summarized the results of the aid given,

The most basic result is the fact that thousands in our colonies were rescued from certain starvation. To grasp this fully one has to have experienced it, or at least have witnessed it. I toured our colonies at that time and was in the homes where swollen victims of starvation were existing on field mice, crows, dogs, carcasses and weed seeds. One has to have seen the tears of joy in their hollow eyes when the first AMR rations were turned over to them. One has to have read some of the hundreds of thank you notes on file in the AMR office in Moscow to catch a true picture of what this feeding of the hungry actually accomplished.

Another significant result was the fact that these relief supplies enabled some of the neediest ones in our colonies not to have to barter away every last animal and bit of machinery—which is now facilitating the task of reconstruction. And what a wonderful boost the fifty tractors were, and the 17,500 ploughed acres, to the challenge of starting all over again. What a deep sense of satisfaction overwhelmed me when I saw them cutting the first furrows in the flat steppes of the Old Colony—steppes overgrown with weeds the height of a man. Since then hundreds of families that no longer had a horse to work with have been provided with five to ten acres of cultivated land.

Finally I must underline a non-material aspect. What a boost to our morale was provided by AMR's help! Families totally crushed by the famine, with absolutely no prospect in sight of ever making it again, received fresh hope and courage to take up the struggle of daily life once more.

Alvin Miller who directed the work, was assisted out on the field by others from America, D.R. Hoeppner, G.G. Hiebert, D. Schroeder, H.C. Yoder. Some have already returned, Arthur Slagel, P.H. Unruh, D.M. Hofer, and C. Krehbiel. We owe a great debt of gratitude to them all. Despite difficult and dangerous circumstances, they stood their ground and have been faithful. This is in broad strokes a picture of the work. (Toews Select 226)

At this point the whole delegation rose as a man to express their thanks to Miller and those he was representing. Miller in turn responded by emphasizing the excellent spirit of cooperation among them. More help had been extended in Russia than in other countries, through a smaller number of outsiders, because of the dedicated help of the people through the local committees.

On the last day of the Congress Miller paid tribute to Klassen's close involvement with AMR in the following words:

In our AMR operations in Siberia we have now found another man that we can entrust the work to. Until this time Cornelius Klassen has been not only our right and left hand but also our eyes and ears and mouth. In our dealings with the authorities Cornelius has been of invaluable help to me. And since he was so well acquainted with the situation in the Mennonite colonies I have been able to delegate all the responsible matters to him. At this point he is probably as well acquainted with the AMR operation in Russia as anyone—both in the Volga region and the South. No Russian Mennonite has given himself more totally to the cause of the relief work than he has. But since he has now been chosen to be on the Board of the AMLV his involvement with us can only be marginal. (Toews 252)

Although the famine relief work, in cooperation with AMR, had been a crucial chapter in CF's life, he now felt eager to give himself to the work of the newly founded AMLV in Moscow on behalf of the colonies' continued struggle for survival. Two other important matters came up on the last day of the Conference related to that work. On the one hand the decision was reached to publish a monthly journal to help members keep in touch with one another. It would be called 'Der praktische Landwirt' (the practical farmer or agriculturalist). Although the main thrust would have to be agricultural, it would also include other news of interest to all.

The other subject that arose was emigration. Peter Froese reported that in the Ukraine permission had been received that summer (1923) for 3,000 Mennonites to emigrate. Up to this point only a few individuals had actually gone, because not that many were yet convinced that this was their best hope. This is quite evident from a resolution that Cornelius proposed and which the delegates accepted. It ran, "The Congress is categorically committed to aggressive reconstruction work in our Colonies, and raises a warning about unrealistic illusions in the matter of emigration; acknowledging, however, that where special circumstances make it clear that emigration is the best solution, the AMLV will do its utmost to assist" (Toews 255). On this note the Congress came to an end and the delegates disbanded hoping for

the best, but aware of the many warning signs that had been and were being raised. The 'unrealistic illusions' referred to were the hopes of getting out easily and the expectation that this would be the quick solution to all their problems.

In the months following, CF and the Board worked hard at founding branch units and sub-branches—nineteen of the former and fifty-six of the latter. This represented 5,965 farms, approximately 80% of all the Mennonite farms outside the Ukraine.

## Chapter 5

### EMIGRATION

*"When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next"*  
(Matthew 10:23).

In spite of all CF's efforts to bring life back into the struggling colonies, the Mennonite people were increasingly seeing emigration as their best option. By 1924 those choosing this alternative included some of his own family. Though his hopes and dreams had been directed toward building a better life again on the steppes of Russia it seemed that was a dying vision. Although he remained faithful at his post in Moscow the pressure to emigrate was increasing.

On May 8, 1923, a few days before the AMLV received official recognition, Klassen and Froese found out that the last obstacle for the first group of emigrants to leave had been removed. This was Germany's willingness to receive any Mennonites who were rejected, because of trachoma or tuberculosis or other illnesses, by the Canadian doctors in Riga. Benjamin Unruh arranged for the German Mennonite Aid Society to provide for their keep at the Lechfeld refugee camp. As soon as this was clarified, B.B. Janz was notified and he came to Moscow. On May 21 Klassen and Janz went to the Foreign Commissariat to complete the arrangements. Everything seemed to be in order. On June 10 a Thanksgiving Service was held at the Menno Center to thank God for His guidance and to ask for strength for the path ahead. June 16 Klassen and Janz left by train for the Ukraine, and, there, on June 22, 1923 the first group of 726 left from Chor-

titza for Canada. It was a tearful farewell. Would they ever see each other again? The train took them to the Russian/Latvian border station at Sebezh and from there on to Riga. Other groups followed in the next weeks, and although about 10% were rejected by the Canadian doctors in Riga, and had to go to Lechfeld in Germany, a total of 2,759 left Russia by the end of the year.

Early in 1924 Klassen and Froese were told that the authorities would no longer accept group lists, only individual applications would be processed. It seemed that as soon as one obstacle was removed the authorities would come up with a new one to takes its place. But the men at the Menno Center were undaunted.

In February CF took in individual applications for 550 families from eastern Russia and all were approved. On March 20 Klassen and Janz negotiated successfully with the Foreign Commissariat for the Canadian doctors to come into the country to do their screening. This was a great step forward and would speed up the flow of emigrants. At this point some internal tensions arose that threatened to hold up the work. The 'Verband,' meeting in the south, decided unilaterally that no Mennonites from elsewhere in Russia should be allowed to leave until 10,000 from the Ukraine had emigrated. Fortunately Janz was in Moscow at the time, and in a meeting with the AMLV executive a compromise was agreed upon whereby, for every six leaving from the Ukraine, four from elsewhere in Russia could leave.

In June CF presented 1,284 individual applications from New Samara, Millerovo, and the Kuban, but suddenly the door in Canada seemed to close. It wasn't until August 20, 1924 that they finally received the good news that the CPR would receive 1,000 more credit passengers, and any number of paying ones. It wasn't until October that this group finally sailed for Canada.

### **The Klassen Family Leaves**

Among them were two of CF's brothers, Franz and Jacob. Franz was next in line to Cornelius. He was twenty-eight, married to Katja Voth and had a little daughter, Elvera. He was an elementary school teacher and felt the prospects in Russia were

not good. Jacob was single and musical and hoped to do some further studying in Canada. Altogether 5,048 Mennonites left Russia during 1924.

The rest of his family, too, began to think seriously of emigrating. Their store had been seized by the authorities right after the revolution and was never returned to them. They were in disrepute and were constantly being questioned, and being pressured for more food and supplies for bandits and soldiers. They just barely survived the famine, living for months on red beets—prepared in every conceivable way. If the AMR supplies had not come when they did, they might not have made it. New Samara had been one of the first colonies to receive help.

In those difficult years their brother Peter, who was somewhat of a patriot and more nominal about his faith, enlisted with the White Army and at the age of twenty-one was reported to have died of typhus somewhere out on the eastern front. This was a real blow to the whole family and caused much heart searching. Then during the winter, Gerhard, twenty-five, who had also been with the White Army despite his father's exhortations, came down with tuberculosis. He was at home for a time convalescing but when his condition degenerated Cornelius took him to a hospital in Moscow where he would receive better treatment. He died there a few months later. Cornelius was able to visit him repeatedly and on his last visit was asked by Gerhard to sing his favorite hymn, "Harre meine Seele" (Wait on the Lord, O my soul). Cornelius said later this was one of the harder experiences of those years. Cornelius had always had a deep appreciation for family and therefore took these experiences very seriously. During the tumultuous years of the Revolution he probably felt deprived of family closeness and intimacy. In the midst of all the unrest and stress, in 1923, their father had also had a stroke and died in January 1924 at the age of fifty-four. Cornelius was able to make the trip back to Donskoj for the funeral, and then brought his seven year old sister Elfrieda, the youngest in the family, back to Moscow with him for a little vacation. Even in the midst of tribulation and sorrow there were times of joy and relief. As it turned out, Elfrieda met Mary (who later would become CF's wife) on this visit and was the only member of the family that did while they were still in Russia.

With Franz, Katja and Jacob already in Canada the remainder of the family also began to plan seriously to emigrate. In the spring of 1925 permission was granted. Cornelius even received permission to escort them as far as Southampton in England— all eight of them; his mother Justina who was fifty, and seven siblings; Henry, twenty-four, Justina, nineteen, John, seventeen, Nick, fifteen, Alex, fourteen, Agatha, ten, and Elfrieda, eight. On arriving in Canada in October 1925 they settled in Winnipeg.

Cornelius returned to Moscow with mixed feelings. He loved his family and really felt they were doing the best thing in heading for a new land of freedom. But he never wavered regarding his own duty: he must return and do what he could to help his struggling brethren who were staying in Russia. Back at the Menno Center he threw himself again into the work at hand. The first issue of *Der praktische Landwirt* had appeared in May so there were reports to be written and articles to be solicited.

The work of the AMLV was growing rapidly, but always in the face of new obstacles that needed to be overcome. There were also an increasing number of representations that had to be made to the authorities to encourage them to grant passes for Mennonites wanting to emigrate to Canada. To get rid of excess population seemed to be to the country's advantage to begin with, but after a time the authorities began to resist the urge for more to leave. They did not want to allow this drain of manpower. On the other hand, as more and more Mennonite farmers were being uprooted from their holdings, they were reluctant to try to start over again. Although reports from the Canadian frontier weren't that glowing, at least the old freedoms they had known were respected there.

Not long after Cornelius returned to Moscow from Southampton, Peter Froese and Daria, his Russian wife, and their three children; Nora six, Erwin four, and Cornelia, (named after Cornelius), one, returned from a silver wedding celebration in Prochladnaja, a Mennonite village in the Kuban settlement. It was the silver wedding of Jacob and Emilie Reimer, a grandson of the Cornelius Reimer who was one of the original founders of the colony back in 1863. Mrs. Froese was a pious woman and although she only spoke Russian, she, with her three children, had

spent a pleasant summer among the Mennonites. Peter combined picking them up with the occasion of the silver wedding of his friends. When it was arranged that Anna, a twenty-two year old daughter of the Reimers, would come to Moscow for a year to help take care of the children and to tutor them in German, the Froeses were delighted. Anna's nine months (September 1925 to June 1926) at the Menno Center give an interesting insight into some of the details of Cornelius' life at the time. (Anna Reimer Dyck, *Anna: from the Caucasus to Canada*, MB Publishing House, Hillsboro KS, 1979)

Not long after arriving Anna reports,

At night, when all the children had been put to bed, the adults gathered around the Froese's tea table. In addition to the Froeses, the group included Peter's brother Vanya, his nephew Andrew Friesen, CF Klassen, usually Alvin Miller the director of AMR, and myself. These evenings were very relaxed, pleasant times. All of us gathered around the cheerfully humming samovar, and discussed current developments in our troubled world. We knew well enough that the work of the Menno Center was dangerous, but we encouraged and strengthened each other. Our meetings often lasted until midnight (Dyck 97).

On one occasion during her stay at the Menno Center Cornelius informed her quietly that there would be a meeting of young Christian men called 'Stundisten' in his room later that night. They arrived in ones and twos, about twenty-five in all, during the course of the evening. All she could hear from the room next door was some quiet singing and talking. The meeting broke up around midnight and they left again in smaller numbers so as not to attract attention. Who were these 'Stundisten'?

*Stundism* is the form that German Pietism (which went back to the 18th century) took in 19th century Russia. They got the name from one of the German leaders who introduced the idea of meeting for one hour (*Stunde* in German) of Bible study and prayer. Their emphasis was personal piety and devotion and a life of good works and mission. The Jacob Kroeker whose preaching in Lugowsk has already been mentioned, left Russia in 1910 and in 1918 founded the mission *Licht im Osten* (Light in the East) in Wernigerode am Harz where he also ran a Bible school to train Russian preachers that identified with this movement. CF took

a real interest in these Russian evangelicals, read their literature, and went out of his way to meet with them. Peter Froese's Russian wife had come out of this circle. According to Anna Reimer, this was the last meeting of its kind at the Menno Center, and because most of those who attended were never seen again, they concluded that some of them must have fallen into the hands of the secret police.

A Mennonite church met in Moscow during these years. Anna Dyck says,

To get there we first had to walk through a long dark passageway, then around a corner, and finally we were at the room. I never went there alone for I felt too uncertain about the surroundings. Later I learned that the room had been selected because the spies would be unlikely to find it. The actual meeting room was a basement and had no windows. A little choir sang at the meetings and on a few occasions Alvin Miller sang a solo. The pastor was a Rev. Scholtje, who was of French background but had married a Mennonite. The services were normally conducted in German.

In February 1926 B.B. Janz felt he had no other choice than to resign as chairman of the *Verband* and make plans to emigrate himself. There was increasing pressure on him from the authorities and especially from the secret police. There is little question that Janz saw more clearly than any other leader the fact that there was no real future for the Mennonites in Russia. He was uncompromisingly dedicated to exodus and thousands became very grateful to him for his vision and dogged persistence. In April 1926 while CF was negotiating with the authorities for Dr. Drury of the Canadian Immigration Commission to travel for three weeks through Slavgorod and Orenburg and then three weeks in the Ukraine, B.B. Janz was arranging for his own secretive departure. May 3 he left Kharkov and June 4 crossed over at Sebezh to freedom. A few days after his departure the secret police were looking for him. As it turned out, more Mennonites left Russia in 1926 than in any other year—5,940 in all. The following year it was already reduced to a mere 847.

## Cornelius and Mary

But for Cornelius there were still eventful days ahead in Russia. It was during these years that he got to know Mary Brieger, who worked for American Mennonite Relief as Alvin Miller's secretary. The more he saw of her, the more impressed he was with the beauty of her character. Who was this charming woman and where did she come from?

Mary was of Baltic German descent and grew up in a Lutheran family in Riga, Latvia. Her parents were Louis and Clara Brieger who lived on a large estate that was a part of the family inheritance. Most of the Germans in Latvia were descendants of the Teutonic Knights who moved eastward from Germany in the late Middle Ages into less populated areas taking over large tracts of land and bringing their civilization with them. One of them was from the city of Brieg in eastern Germany, and these people from Brieg (Von Brieg) became known as the Briegers.

Mary was the middle of three girls, Irmgard being older and Erika younger. They attended a private German school for girls (Fraeulein Adelheid von Wierehn's Tochterschule hoechster Ordnung) where religious instruction according to the Lutheran tradition was part of the curriculum. Mary knew the Lutheran catechism by memory and often quoted sections of it in later life. She was a very able student blessed with an exceptional memory. She knew whole dramas of Schiller by memory as well as hundreds of poems—mostly in German and Russian, and even a few simpler ones in French and English. Later in Canada she enjoyed meeting and quoting poetry with men like C.C. Peters (father of Frank C. Peters, late president of Wilfrid Laurier University) who had a similar gift for poetry. To begin with, the main language of instruction was German, with Russian, French and English taught as foreign languages; but in her last few years of school the Czar's policy of Russification forced the school to adopt Russian as the first language of instruction. This meant that she became very familiar with the great Russian authors, and it also meant that she had no trouble communicating when she got to St Petersburg and Moscow.

It was quite evident already in her early years that Mary had a hunger for God and a sensitivity to spiritual things. She wasn't normally tearful, but when the story of the crucifixion was being read she confessed she was moved to tears. The injustice of it and the innocent suffering moved her deeply. She had a humble heart and, although she grew up in a privileged context, in later life she was quick to identify with the lowly and underprivileged and lived a life of modesty and simplicity with conviction.

After her graduation she worked in Riga for the British shipping firm Malcolms, being put in charge of foreign correspondence. She picked up the skills quickly and became a proficient secretary, being transferred during the War to St. Petersburg and later to Moscow. She was in St. Petersburg during the chaotic days of the Revolution, and it was here that she met and fell in love with a Mennonite music student, who had come up to the big city from the Crimea. He was a gifted musician and charming young man, and when she visited his family and the Mennonite community in the Crimea she was so impressed with the sincerity and piety of these people that she resolved to become one of them. They were married soon afterward, but she found out to her great regret that under his charm and behind his musical talent was a weakness of character that, after they had moved to Moscow, manifested itself in an instability that made him an unreliable provider and, finally, an unfaithful husband. It was not too long after their first child was born that it became evident that he was seeing other women, one of whom, a Russian girl, was also carrying his child. It was at this point that he disappeared out of her life.

Through her acquaintance with the Mennonites, Mary had begun work as Alvin Miller's secretary and it was in this position that Cornelius had come to know her. The better he got to know her the more clearly he recognized in her a depth and beauty of character that impressed him deeply. In his eyes she had been betrayed and abandoned by one of his own people. His heart was touched with compassion for her. Could it be God's will that he should take her and her child unto himself and thereby help give her a new beginning? He wrestled with this question for some time and sought the Lord about it. He also counselled with his friend Peter Froese. It was a difficult decision and would be a cost-

ly one. Difficult because of her previous marriage, but also because she had not yet had the opportunity to enter into a full understanding and experience of believers' baptism, which would make her acceptable in MB circles. Her faith was genuine and she participated actively in the prayer sessions at the Menno Center.

The question of their relationship came to a head in the summer of 1926. His whole family had emigrated to Canada the year before so they weren't in the picture at this time. Alvin Miller and all the AMR personnel had also left Russia by this time. During the past twelve years he had had very little contact with the MB church in Lugowsk of which he was a member. In functional terms, his church was the people with whom his life had become intertwined at the Menno Center, and they knew him and Mary very well.

When he finally broached the subject of marriage with Mary, she was very reluctant. She knew the respect he had earned in the Mennonite brotherhood for his dedicated work and spiritual integrity. She feared what the people would say and what this could mean to his reputation. The more she had come to know him the more she respected his strength of character and his commitment to his work and to his people and to his God. But at last she too was convinced in her heart that this was the right step and that she should not hold back any longer.

It was on September 11, 1926 in the Menno Center, where they had both worked for a number of years, that Cornelius and Mary were married. Rev. Herman Riesen from Old Samara, a close friend and associate in the work of the AMLV and preacher among the 'churchly' Mennonites, delivered the sermon, basing his remarks on the words of Jacob in Genesis 35:3 "...then let us arise and go to Bethel, that I may make there an altar to the God who answered me in the day of my distress and has been with me wherever I have gone." It was a word from the Lord. They were both conscious that in their distress God had heard their cry and had been with them wherever they had gone.

It was Rev. Johannes Klassen from the MB church in Old Samara who performed the marriage ceremony. His text was taken from Lamentations 3:19-24:

"Remember my affliction and my bitterness,

the wormwood and the gall!  
My soul continually thinks of it  
and is bowed down within me.  
But this I call to mind  
and therefore have hope:  
The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases,  
His mercies never come to an end,  
they are new every morning;  
great is Thy faithfulness.  
"The Lord is my portion," says my soul,  
"therefore I will hope in Him."

The first two verses expressed just how Mary felt: her unwise first marriage had brought 'affliction and bitterness,' and how true the words, that she 'continually thought of it,' and was consequently 'bowed down within her.' Their only hope was that the steadfast love and mercy of the Lord would never come to an end—that it would also cover them.

Whoever was at the Menno Center on September 11, 1926 was a part of the wedding company. One of those was John B. Toews, a nineteen-year-old student from Alexandertal in the Ukraine, who was there with his sister, on their flight from Russia to America. He would later become a good friend of the couple in Winnipeg in the mid-forties, when CF was on the Board of the Mennonite Brethren Bible College and John B. Toews was its president. Reflecting on the union many years later, he observed that Mary was undoubtedly God's chosen helpmeet for CF. Her unique giftedness equipped her to serve by his side as no other woman could have.

Cornelius himself realized that there might be family and friends who thought he was making a mistake and he would have to be willing to suffer this patiently. Some might never forgive him and could hold it against him in years to come. Realizing there was no easy solution and not wanting to be a problem to them he wrote to the pastor of the MB church in Lugowsk asking to withdraw his membership, which they did. Before he left Russia there was renewed communication, and in 1929 after his arrival in Canada, he received a warm letter from the church through Bernhard Bargen, the pastor, saying they had met and unani-

mously extended to him once more the right hand of fellowship.

## Growing Government Pressure

As for now, the newly married couple moved into the Menno Center where the work continued on under mounting pressure. In 1926 the *Verband* in the Ukraine was dissolved. The government would no longer tolerate their aggressive involvement in the emigration movement. December 1926 was also the last time that the authorities allowed *Der praktische Landwirt* to be published. The dark night of oppression was descending upon them.

In February 1927 the delegates to the fourth and final Congress of the AMLV gathered in Moscow. It was becoming increasingly clear that total conformity to the Communist system was expected of everyone. The period of toleration after the drought and famine was an emergency measure, an exception. Mennonite colonies were viewed as an echo from the capitalist past, and an affront to a system where the state is god.

The pressure from the Bolsheviks was increasing. CF reports that they

imported communists from Germany, Austria and the border states . . . who knew neither Russian conditions, nor the Mennonites. They were sent to the German colonies from Moscow with orders to strengthen the revolution in the colonies." As their hate towards the Mennonites increased, their undermining work was stepped up until the inevitable happened. In the summer of 1928 the AMLV was finally dissolved by the Party. A Russian economist known to them, confidentially shared the reasons why this action was necessitated: 1) The AMLV has throughout its existence nourished the illusion among the Mennonites that they had a right to their own economic co-operatives and separatistic development. 2) The AMLV has always been a handicap in the program of sovietizing the Mennonite colonies. 3) From the point of view of Soviet policy it had been a mistake for the central government to authorize the establishment of the AMLV, thereby promoting a Mennonite separatism which was intolerable (MQR 77).

In view of the Bolshevik policy towards nationalities in Russia CF writes,

This statement was clear and only confirmed what we had

long known. We had long seen through the entire tissue of lies which had been woven around the famous 'liberal' policy of Bolshevism toward nationalities in Russia. We were not to be allowed to have a free economic administration and not a free development of our cultural thrust. They wanted to transform us into the same proletarians with neither religion nor nationality, just as they had already done with the numerous racial minorities and are still doing today, and now, in order to accomplish their criminal work in our colonies as well, our organization had to be extirpated (MQR 77).

The profound disappointment this action caused CF is summed up in his words.

We attempted with all the means which were at our command to conserve the good which our fathers had handed down to us and to create new values... All that had been accomplished by the years of exertion and sacrifice which our local organizations had made, all the result of the sacrificial labor in which the leaders constantly risked their freedom and very often also their lives, was now destroyed (MQR 77).

It was during this time of uncertainty that Walfried was born on June 27, 1927. A year later during the spring and summer of 1928 Mary was feeling more and more strongly that there was no real future for them as a family in Russia. To begin with Cornelius would not hear of this. But Stalin's grip on the country was being consolidated and his rantings against the 'kulaks' (middle class farmers) were becoming more and more ominous. It was obvious that about 90% of all Mennonites in Russia fit that category. Mary continued to prevail upon Cornelius to at least apply for emigration passes—which he finally did because he felt there was no real possibility that they would be granted. As far as he was concerned his loyalty was to his brethren in Russia, and there was still much work that would have to be done.

In her heart Mary felt the net of evil closing in on them, so she kept going to the authorities herself, insisting that they process the passes. To their amazement in mid-September, 1928 a minor official obliged, and on the following day Mary was there to pick them up. Cornelius, too, was surprised and was finally prepared to take it as a sign from the Lord that they should, for the time being, leave. But it wasn't easy. Peter Froese was closer to him than a brother, and there were so many others with whom

they had worked together always hoping against hope that things would change for the better. But on September 24, 1928 they boarded a train for Riga— Cornelius and Mary and their two sons; Harold, four, and Walfried, fifteen months. The fact that Mary was three months pregnant at this time contributed no doubt to her sense of urgency to leave and to find a safer haven.

At the border they were thoroughly searched, even to the point of tearing into the linings of their coats and between the soles of their shoes. Their money, much more than the authorities would have permitted them to take, was in Mary's bag. In it was also a container of salt that had spilled. The official put in his hand and when he felt the salt he cursed and cleared them. Greatly relieved, yet heavy-hearted, they travelled on to Riga. There they were able to meet Mary's two sisters, Irmgard, who had married Peter Sadikov, and Erika, who had married Alexander Kariton. They agreed to leave their two boys with the Sadikovs, who also had two children; Sarozha and Wera, while Cornelius and Mary visited some of their friends in Germany and Holland.

In Germany they met their dear friend Benjamin Unruh in Karlsruhe. When he left Russia in January 1920 with the Study Commission to solicit help for his suffering brethren he had always assumed that he would finally be returning to Russia. But it was not to be. From Germany he had represented their cause very actively. His greatest contribution was yet to come, however, in connection with the last groups that came out in 1929 and 1930. It was a great joy for Cornelius and Mary to meet the Unruhs and other leading brethren among the European Mennonites in Germany, Switzerland and Holland.

After collecting their children back in Riga, they crossed the channel to England and on November 30, 1928 they left Liverpool on the Canadian Pacific Steam ship 'Duchess of Atholl.' They arrived in St. John, New Brunswick on the eighth of December and arrived in Winnipeg by train on the tenth of December— where they were warmly received by his mother and brothers and sisters.

Cornelius and Mary were deeply saddened when they found out that, soon after they left Moscow, Peter Froese was arrested and banished to Siberia for ten years of slave labor. What would the next years hold for each of them? Would they ever meet again?

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## **II. CANADA**

# **1929-1945**

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### **Prologue**

As he faced the challenges of new life in a new land with his young family, CF's heart was often painfully drawn back to the plight of friends and loved ones in troubled Russia. The hand of Providence had led him out at a crucial moment—of that there could be no doubt, and he was deeply thankful. He could also be grateful for the vessel God had used to expedite the decision just at the critical time, his dear wife. Yet his heart was torn for the suffering of his co-worker Froese, and the countless others who would be less fortunate in their attempts to flee Russia in the ensuing years. Thus, though his positive nature drew him immediately into wholehearted efforts to make a life in Canada, he would never forget the brothers and sisters he had left behind. Their pain and suffering would haunt him throughout the years as he prayed and waited for further opportunity to help them. And though he had important tasks before him in Canada, this

became one of the motifs of his life later recognized by Orie Miller as one of CF's driving passions: "the anticipation of returning to Russia one day to minister to the brethren there."

But for now there were more pressing tasks; the settlement of his family in Winnipeg, the building of working relationships with key Mennonite figures in Canada and the wider Mennonite brotherhood, the challenge of the war years and the support of the non-resistant status of Mennonites. And on the horizon a task that consumed much of his time and energy from 1930 until his return to Europe in 1946—the collection of the travel debt to the CPR incurred by his fellow refugees.

## Chapter 6

# NEW BEGINNINGS

*"He brought them to their desired haven . . ." (Psalm 107:30).*

As CF and his young family were traveling by train from St. John, New Brunswick to Winnipeg, Manitoba there were many questions on his heart. How would his family receive his wife, whom they had never met and who was not of Mennonite background? How difficult would he and Mary find the learning of a new language? German and Russian they knew, but English was completely strange to them. Mary had some exposure to the written language at her girls' high school in Riga and through her job as secretary in charge of foreign correspondence, but that would be of little help when it came to the challenge of going shopping and communicating with neighbors and teachers. What kind of work would Cornelius find? His studies in Russia had been interrupted by the War and Revolution, and were then put on hold by his assignment in Moscow at the Menno center. His original plan to study medicine had by now faded. In fact, his involvement in the AMLV had turned his interests to agricultural economics—which would be of great help in serving his Russian brethren should they ever be able to return. He even wrote in 1929 to a young Mennonite friend in Germany, Richard Hertzler, inquiring about pursuing these studies in Germany. In the meanwhile he had to support a wife and two young children with a third on the way. Fortunately they had been able to 'smuggle' out sufficient funds to pay their fare and provide for their basic needs for as

much as a year—but what then?

## Life in Winnipeg

The train journey to Winnipeg took two days and two nights, and as they came closer he became quite excited. He loved his mother dearly and had last seen her and his brothers and sisters in the fall of 1925 in Southampton, England. Letters to Moscow had been few and far between so he had little knowledge of how they were making out in their new homeland.

In the meanwhile the family had received notice of the time of their arrival and, not having an automobile, they rented one to go and meet their big brother and his wife and sons and bring them home. Unfortunately, mother, who had been sickly for some time, was not well enough to join the others in going to the station.

When CF and Mary with Harold and little Walfried stepped out onto the platform there was great rejoicing—but Cornelius' first question was "Where is mother?" As soon as their many pieces of baggage were collected, they crammed into the car and headed south on Main Street to Portage Avenue and on to Donald Street. What a joyful reunion with his mother and how proud he was to introduce Mary and his two boys!

The home on Donald Street was in one of the older residential areas of central Winnipeg close to the big Eaton's and Hudson's Bay stores. The house they were renting was a large one and housed most of the family. Franz and Katja and their two girls Elvera and Nora were living near Steinbach, Manitoba where Franz was teaching elementary school. Jacob had been studying Music and Art at the Mennonite College in Bluffton, Ohio and was now teaching public school in Roblin, Manitoba. All the rest were living on Donald Street.

Henry, now twenty-eight, had married Kaetie Thiessen the year before in Rosthern, Saskatchewan. She was the daughter of CF's good friend, Franz C. Thiessen, the teacher from Davelekanovo who had also been active in the AMLV. They had two rooms on the second floor, and a little kitchenette in the hallway. One of their rooms they were renting out to an Arthur

Unruh—son of the first MB missionaries to India. Justina, now twenty-two, was employed as a seamstress at Eaton's, working for \$5.00 per week. John, twenty, had apprenticed with the Winnipeg Electric Company as a machinist, but was presently unemployed. He was particularly helpful to Mary in helping to get them settled. Nick was eighteen and was just finishing off at Kelvin High School where he had enjoyed his courses in drafting and art. He would later find employment at Hudsons Bay Co. designing and making window displays. Alec was sixteen and still at Kelvin High School. On graduating he found employment at Piggly Wiggly, a grocery chain store, working for one dollar a day! Agatha was fourteen and still in junior high school, and Elfrieda, eleven, was completing elementary school. So the transition to Canadian society had been made and they looked like a well-adjusted new immigrant family. But one further adjustment had to be made: Cornelius was the oldest son and he would now take his place beside his mother at the head of the family.

Two rooms on the main floor had been vacated for Cornelius and Mary and their boys. The house was crowded but they were a happy family and quite content to make the best of their situation. Having arrived just before Christmas, the first big family event was the Christmas celebration. On Christmas Eve they all made their way to the little MB mission church on Lilly Street where the service was carried on very much along the lines that they were used to in New Samara. After the service they returned to the house for the family celebration. Cornelius read the Christmas story and prayed and then some of the verses the younger ones had learned through their Sunday school classes were shared. Finally the presents were distributed. They were modest ones but the joy was genuine and deep. What a great privilege to be together as a family in a land of freedom. They couldn't help but remember in prayer their dear friends still under the communist yoke. At the church they had met other friends of theirs from Russia, like Cornelius A. and Elizabeth DeFehr and their sons. The North End MB church on College Avenue was already functioning under the leadership of C.N. Hiebert, but at this point it was too far away for them to attend.

In March there was great excitement in the Donald Street household. Mary gave birth to her third son, whom they named

Herbert, and Kaetie gave birth to her first, whom they called Frank. Herbert was named after Herbert Hoover who had been in charge of the American Relief Administration that had been such a blessing to many of the Russian Mennonites in the hard twenties. In 1928 he was elected Republican president of the USA. CF wrote to him thanking him for his part in bringing relief to his Mennonite brotherhood, and received a kind reply. CF was not as pleased with his successor, president Roosevelt, who later at Potsdam and Yalta, allowed himself to be taken in by Stalin—at least in CF's eyes. With three children Cornelius felt that Mary needed help, so in typical European style, a Russian Mennonite girl was hired to live in and assist her.

### **Deputation Trip**

During the spring and summer Cornelius was in contact with the leader of the Mennonite Board of Colonization, the man always referred to in German as *Aeltester* David Toews. *Aeltester* was used by mainline Mennonites in Russia and by the General Conference Mennonites of America as a term of respect for senior church leaders and although it has sometimes been translated as 'bishop' probably 'elder' is more accurate. CF was deeply impressed with Toews and looked up to him as a true elder brother and leader in the faith. CF was also in touch with Rev. P.C. Hiebert, the chairman of the MCC in the United States, who lived in Hillsboro Kansas, an MB center. CF became a close friend of both of these men, and as we shall see his destiny was to dovetail with them and their organizations, first the 'Board' and then the MCC.

As a result of his acquaintance with Toews and Hiebert he was to be sent on a deputation assignment through the Russian Mennonite communities of the United States and western Canada. Many of these people he saw last in their colonies in Russia during the famine or at the Menno center where he was negotiating for their exit visas. What a joy it was to see them again and to see their farms and their churches. Many were still in very primitive circumstances but at least they were free and full of hope. This journey lasted from August to November and provided

him a wonderful introduction to the North American Mennonite brotherhood.

One of his joys early in the journey was to be reunited with Professor Alvin Miller in Kalona, Iowa, where he was now teaching. Miller was eager to hear what had transpired in Russia since he left in 1926. In Hillsboro P.C. Hiebert took him around in a model A Ford to visit the different farms and churches. Hiebert was a descendant of the MBs who had come from Russia during the 1870s and 80s, the first wave. From Kansas CF travelled by train to visit communities in Nebraska and then on to California where there were large centers in Reedley, Dinuba and Bakersfield. From there he took a train up to British Columbia where the first beginnings were being made in the Yarrow area under the leadership of his old friend Gerhard Doerksen. In Coaldale, Alberta he met his colleague and friend B.B. Janz, who was farming and pastoring the MB church. He was also active with David Toews on the Mennonite Board of Colonization. In Rosstern, Saskatchewan it was Elder David Toews who took him around to visit the different farms and churches. From there it was back to Winnipeg where his family anxiously awaited him.

It was while on this journey that the Stock Market crash happened on Wall Street in New York on October 24, 1929. It made big news and was picked up on their wireless sets and then in their Mennonite newspapers *Der Bote* and *Die Rundschau*. But nobody dreamt how far-reaching the consequences would be and how it would play into one of the greatest depressions ever to hit the western world. Low prices for farm products would combine with low wages and with drought and crop failures. The tough twenties for these new immigrants would turn into the grim thirties.

It was a week later, on October 30, 1929, that the Canadian government suddenly, because of electioneering and a change in governing parties, closed the doors to Russian Mennonite immigrants. Because 1,019 Mennonites had already emigrated to Canada during 1929, other thousands flocked into Moscow hoping as well to receive permission to leave. But the Communists were finally digging in their heels, and although about 2,500 finally got to Brazil and another 1,500 to Paraguay, about twelve thousand were refused permission to leave and were forcibly ex-

iled to Siberia where many of them perished. Elder Toews was trying through the Board to put pressure on the Canadian government to intervene and Benjamin Unruh was doing his utmost from Karlsruhe in Germany, but their efforts were largely frustrated. It hurt Cornelius deeply because he knew what they were going through in Moscow and what this meant for their future and that of their relatives and friends still in the colonies.

For this little family of five their first year in Canada had been an eventful one, and at their Christmas celebration 1929 great gratitude rose to God for all His kindness and mercy to them in their new land of refuge. The whole household on Donald Street was still together as they closed the chapter of the twenties. In one decade they had seen their whole world in Russia crumble and a new one begin to emerge for them in Canada. As they looked toward the thirties, few realized the new hardships and challenges that lay ahead.

## Chapter 7

### ‘REISESCHULD’ —THE TRAVEL DEBT

*“Owe no man anything but to love one another”*  
(Romans 13:8).

Early in the New Year David Toews offered Cornelius three months work as assistant bookkeeper and cashier for the Canadian Mennonite Board of Colonization—known among Mennonites as ‘the Board.’ He was happy to accept since he needed work and this would keep him in close touch with his Mennonite people. It was also the kind of work in which Mary could assist him. She was an excellent secretary and bookkeeper and would be able to hold the fort while he was on the road. Writing to Toews in April he mentioned that his three year old clung very close to him for fear that his father would be leaving again. He also mentioned that they were looking for their own house to rent. Since Henry and Kaetie wanted to move as well, it was decided that they should give up the Donald Street house. Mother Klassen with her single sons and daughters moved to Arlington Street, Henry and Kaetie to Union Street, and Cornelius and Mary found a suitable little house in Woodhaven, a southern suburb of Winnipeg just beyond the City Park.

#### **Mennonite World Relief Conference**

During that spring and summer plans were being made that

Cornelius should accompany David Toews as Canadian representatives to the second Mennonite World Conference, which was being called earlier than planned because of the crisis in Moscow. It was to convene in Danzig, West Prussia, from August 30 to September 3 and was to be called a Mennonite World *Relief* Conference. Cornelius was eager to go for the sake of his suffering brothers in Russia. He would be that much closer and as a united body maybe something more could be done for them from there.

Although he regretted having to leave Mary and the three children, he was delighted to go with Elder David Toews—and they left by train from the same station he had arrived at eighteen months ago. In Quebec before boarding their ship they agreed to put together an 'Appeal to the Mennonite Brotherhood in North America' asking them to pray God's blessing on the work of the World Relief Conference. They felt their own helplessness and knew they must cry unitedly to God for his help. The ship took them to Southampton from where they crossed the channel and caught a train to Danzig.

The first Mennonite World Conference had convened in Switzerland in 1925, called together by the two German Mennonite leaders and historians Christian Neff and Christian Hege. The main theme of that gathering had been gratefulness to God for his hand upon their little flock for 400 years. There was some awareness at that time of the plight of their brotherhood in Russia but the enormity of it had not yet sunk in. This changed in 1929 when 5,700 of their persecuted brethren were able to cross over the border into Germany. Relief committees and organizations sprang up and heroic efforts were made to help them on their way through to South America. In April 1930 representatives of many Mennonite conferences and groups had met in Europe and agreed that the needs of their brothers in Russia were so desperate that a Mennonite World *Relief* Conference should be called for the fall of 1930. They agreed it was their Christian duty to respond as quickly and as fully as possible to the tragic fate that had engulfed their brethren to the East.

It was with this sense of urgency that the delegates gathered in Danzig on August 30. Little bits of news of Stalin's ruthless treatment of the Mennonite farmers kept coming through. Was there any way that relief could be sent in, or more emigrants be

brought out? The hearts of these leaders from among the Mennonites were closely knit together during the days of this gathering. Many of them were to become close associates of CF's in the critical years ahead. They couldn't know that in fifteen years they would be working together in gathering a new wave of refugees from Russia and assisting them along the way to new homelands.

One of these men was Emil Haendiges, pastor of the Mennonite church in Elbing, West Prussia, who spoke on behalf of the Union of Mennonite Churches of the Third Reich. At this point they were proud of their country and its leaders, and he thanked President Hindenberg for his personal contribution of two million marks toward the cause of relief, and the government for the six million marks it provided to help sustain the approximately 6,000 Mennonite refugees during their stay in the refugee camps in Hammerstein, Prenzlau and Moelln. This kindness of the German government toward the Mennonites is one reason why many of them assumed that Hitler and his party could be trusted— until the facts proved otherwise.

Johannes Foth, from Friedelsheim in the Palatinate, spoke on behalf of the South German Mennonite Conference and the Conference of the Mennonites of the Palatinate and Hessen.

Elder Michael Horsch from Hellmansberg, brother-in-law to Harold Bender and founder of *Christenpflicht* (Christian's duty) a German Mennonite relief organization, spoke on behalf of the Mennonite Conference of Baden-Wuertemberg-Bavaria.

It was Benjamin Unruh now residing in Germany who set the stage for CF's talk on "The State of our Mennonite Congregations of Russia since 1920." Although Unruh had left Russia in 1920 no one had been as active in appealing to the German government and to Mennonites in America for help as he was. He also drew on the help of men like Frijhof Nanssen and Professor Otto Auhagen who were well known champions of the cause of refugees and the oppressed. His first talk at the Conference had surveyed the Mennonite organizations in Germany, Switzerland and Holland that came into being in response to the need in Russia.

Since the focus of the Conference was on the need in Russia, CF's talk was eagerly received by the delegates. In addition to surveying the suffering and persecution in the colonies brought

on by the Revolution, he was able to describe for them the effects of these times on the spiritual affairs of the colonies:

Our congregations were permitted relative freedom of activity for several years after the revolution. The law forbade religious instruction for children it is true, and in our schools this instruction had to be given up, but we tried as much as possible to improve our religious services for children on Sundays and to develop capable leaders for this work.

The teachers were required not only to give up all religious instruction in the school, but also to give direct anti-religious instruction. Many teachers voluntarily gave up their schools, others were expelled by the authorities and were without jobs and without food, others attempted to hold out at their posts for the sake of the children, even under the most difficult circumstances. We can scarcely imagine even a small part of the nerve-wracking struggles in which they stood alone without the support of anyone, and in spite of an inner repugnance against the entire educational policy of the government nevertheless remained at their posts in order to protect the children from the godless influence of their successors. If we had realized what they were going through there would have been much more prayer in their behalf.

The organ of the General Conference, *Unser Blatt*, was published in spite of great difficulty and frequent delays due to the censors until June, 1928, and was then suppressed. Somewhat earlier the itinerant evangelism had been forbidden, and the preachers had been limited to their own congregations. The right to vote was taken from the preachers and they were burdened with various taxes which in most cases led to complete confiscation of property. If they could not pay the inhuman taxes they were thrown into prison. The Bolsheviks naturally do not want to have this procedure called a persecution of Christians, but they simply reckoned the preachers as 'kulaks' and this class was to be destroyed. What it means to a preacher to attempt to serve his congregation under such pressure can only be understood by one who has personally experienced it, and in spite of everything we have many, many preachers who are continuing faithfully in service, in spite of the fact that they stand in daily danger of suffering the fate of their colleagues who are lying in prison, or who are suffering terrible things in the far north, far from their families and from their congregations, in the forests or in the concentration camps, or who were able to escape in time and now are wandering about, today here and tomorrow there, in constant danger of being caught by their pursuers. God alone knows their need and God alone can help them.

The great need of our brethren in Russia has brought the

Mennonites of the entire world closer together. Previously we were strangers and today we are close together (MQR 78-9).

CF's presence at this conference gave a voice to those at this time being persecuted for the common faith and vision shared by all the delegates. In the face of the relative freedoms shared by most present, it was a sobering fact for them to face that some of their brethren still carried the torch of the martyr church.

Concluding his review of those years CF gave emotional expression to his sense of solidarity with those still remaining in Russia:

Again in these days, as I have so often before, I let the conditions of our Mennonite communities at home in Russia since the revolution, pass before my mind's eye: economic disintegration, famine, emigration, flight etc., and finally I stopped a few moments beside the graves of our dear ones in the lonely railroad stations along the northern railroad and in the infinite stretches of primitive forests in the far north. I vision the brethren who are crowded together there in the narrow barracks where many a mother heart cries out to the Lord for a daughter who has been torn from her, where hungry children cry for bread, and where the sick cry for help, where thousands and thousands long for deliverance and where no help is to be had. I vision my colleagues who are now for over a year in prison in Moscow, who are being tortured. There are so many thousands who are waiting in vain for help and yet we know that the Lord cares for all and will act when the time comes (MQR 79-80).

He concluded his speech with an expression of gratitude to the worldwide Mennonite brotherhood, and a plea that the spirit of shared burden-bearing would continue to bear fruit on behalf of suffering Russian brethren:

And when I think of all the wonderful help which the Mennonites of the entire world have rendered to their brethren in need, then I can better understand what the Apostle Paul meant in his challenge to the Galatians 'Let us not be weary in well-doing.' Dear brethren, you and your churches are not yet weary, this conference demonstrates it to us. How is that possible? Only because God has loved us human beings with a love eternal, love which exceeds all thought in its mercy, and exceeds all comprehension, and this conference is a new demonstration of love. The Lord has given us Mennonites of Russia many friends... May this conference be filled with the spirit of Christ and may its participants perform the work of the conference, equipped with a strong faith. Let us remind our-

selves again that 'no other foundation can any man lay than that which is laid, Christ Jesus.' Only on this foundation are we able 'to each bear his brother's burden,' and that in the full sense of the apostolic word. Let us, therefore, do all that we do, in our deliberations and decisions, as before Him and under the authority of His word. To Him, the Father, belongeth the honor, and His blessing I wish to this conference in rich measure (MQR 80).

Right after CF, Professor Harold S. Bender delivered his lecture on "American Mennonite Relief Work in Russia." Bender himself was doing graduate work at this time in Anabaptist studies at the University of Heidelberg, and since he was already in Europe the MCC asked him to represent them at the Conference.

Bender opened his talk by mentioning that his own ancestors had fled the Palatinate in 1707 and with the help of the Dutch Mennonites were able to make their way to Pennsylvania. It was no more than right that they should now be willing to help their Russian brethren in their hour of need. Bender seemed very conscious of the fact, CF felt, that God was working by His Spirit among the Mennonites during the War and in the post-War period. God was seeking to awaken them in order to use them as an instrument of His mercy. "Let's yield ourselves fully to Him," he challenged the Conference. CF's heart responded. Bender and Klassen were kindred spirits and a friendship was formed at this Conference that lasted throughout their lives. A hope was born in CF's heart at this time that at least one of his children might be able to study Anabaptist history under Bender's tutelage at Goshen College—a dream fulfilled only after his death.

Bender's five-point summary of American Mennonite relief thrusts really inspired Cornelius. It began *first* with the help offered to the first wave of Russian Mennonite immigrants after 1873. \$150,000 were raised, especially in Pennsylvania, to help these immigrants get settled out on the western plains. The great famine in India in 1897 became the occasion of the *second* venture into American Mennonite relief work. Two significant missionary enterprises, one of the (Old) Mennonites and one of the General Conference Mennonites, came into being in India as a result of this effort. The *third* piece of American Mennonite Relief work was undertaken in post World War I France where the Mennonites cooperated with the Quakers in their great work of

reconstruction. The Mennonites contributed \$300,000 and fifty-six young men in this relief effort— one of whom was Alvin Miller. The *fourth* venture focussed on post War Asia Minor through 'Near East Relief.' Twenty three young Mennonite men, including Orie Miller, worked out of Constantinople into Greece and Turkey. The *fifth* great effort was that amongst their Mennonite brothers in Russia, and this is where CF first came on the scene.

CF was touched to recall that one of the young Mennonite volunteers from America, Clayton Kratz, laid down his life in this effort. He reached Halbstadt in October 1920 but was caught by the Red Army and it is assumed was murdered by them. "Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends."

Next Elder David Toews addressed the Conference. There was no doubt in CF's mind that this humble dedicated man was one of the true patriarchs of the Mennonite brotherhood. He began simply by saying that on one occasion he had been introduced as the Mennonite with the most children— 21,000, and the individual with the greatest debt— \$2,000,000! It was in 1923 in Montreal that he put his signature to a document promising on behalf of his persecuted brothers in Russia that the debt they were incurring to the CPR would be repaid. What a giant step of faith! Some fathers will not co-sign a document for \$200 for their very own sons, yet here is a man who believed in his heart that they were his true brothers and sisters in the faith and that he could do no less. This faith would be severely tested in the years to come, but like his forefather Abraham he did not waver. A bond of loyalty was being forged at this time between Klassen and Toews that would bring CF to the point where he considered it an honor to shoulder this burden together with this saintly man.

The delegates were deeply moved as Toews filled in the background. The obstacles to be overcome, even before these refugees were granted permission to come, were enormous. In 1918 an Order in Cabinet had been proclaimed forbidding any emigration to Canada from Russia. How could this be revoked? In July 1921 in Herbert, Saskatchewan a conference of Mennonites agreed to send a delegation to Ottawa. Toews with four others had to wait until the Federal Election was concluded—the election which brought Mackenzie King and the Liberal Party into power. When

Toews appeared before the new Prime Minister he got a favorable hearing, influenced no doubt by Mr. King's own personal contacts with Mennonites in his home riding of Prince Albert, Saskatchewan. Encouraged by their reception in Ottawa, the delegation traveled on to Montreal to meet with Colonel Dennis, head of the Canadian Colonization Association of the CPR. He agreed to advance them credit for 3,000 Russian Mennonite immigrants, should the government really revoke its Order in Council. This did happen in short order, so the deal was on.

Meanwhile the delegation had returned to Gretna, Manitoba and in April 1922 the 'Canadian Mennonite Board of Colonization' was organized. The main office would be in Rosthern, Saskatchewan the home of David Toews. Between that time and the time of the Conference, over 20,000 refugees had come and the debt had risen to two million dollars, only two-fifths of which had been paid back. The record of these new immigrants is truly remarkable. Of the 20,000 only one was deported back to Germany, and that was at his own request. Due to an amazing network of caring organized by Toews none of them over the years became a burden to the state. To accomplish this Toews kept soliciting the brotherhood in the United States for donations of used clothing and financial support. Even hospital fees incurred by the new immigrants could be covered as they arose.

The Conference was deeply impressed by what Toews and the Board had accomplished on behalf of their needy brethren. The final message of the World Relief Conference was given by Jakob Kroeker from Wernigerode in Germany—the Russian Mennonite we met earlier. He used the incident in David's life when he was told to 1) "go to your brothers" and refresh them; 2) "see how your brothers fare" and bring back news of them; and 3) "contend for your brothers" and rescue them (1 Sam 17). Kroeker applied each of these points to the plight of their brothers in Russia and the charge that God was laying on the hearts of those at this historic Relief Conference.

Toews and Klassen headed home enriched by the many friendships and encouraged by the united concern expressed by their brothers from all across Europe and other parts of the world, expressed for the suffering ones in Russia. Cornelius was honored too and blessed to be able to share the whole experience in Dan-

zig together with David Toews.

It was to their first little home in Woodhaven that CF returned after the Conference. He was eager to find out how his oldest son Harold was doing in grade one at the local elementary school just two blocks from their home. He spoke German and Russian fluently but no English and the adjustment was not an easy one. For many days on his way home from school some of his classmates taunted him and bullied him. He was rather short and stocky at that time and his mother could see him at a distance with his shoulders hunched and his hands in his pockets suffering their abuse patiently. Cornelius would have been inclined to intervene to discipline the little ruffians, but Mary inquired of his sympathetic teacher, whether anything should be done, but she wisely suggested that if he could endure it the children would soon let up. And so it was. As his English improved he soon made some good friends and enjoyed the give and take—and proved to be an excellent student.

### **Collecting the debt**

CF had done some itinerating for 'the Board' after his three month stint as bookkeeper, but it wasn't until October 15 that Toews and the Board appointed him as secretary treasurer in charge of collecting the '*Reiseschuld*.' In shouldering the burden of its repayment with David Toews and others CF was entering into a filial bond. He would stand with his brothers and carry out many years of thankless work as a point of loyalty and honor. In 1946 the fruit of all his toil was rewarded when Toews received in tears and incredulity on his death-bed, the news that the debt had been fully repaid.

But God had deeper purposes in allowing this task to consume so many years and so much energy. He was perfecting a vessel to be used in future tasks. Characteristics like patience, perseverance, humility and long suffering were forged in these years. And the honoring of the debt worked a broader trust towards the Mennonite people from government and higher officialdom. CF's extensive travels also gave him invaluable knowledge as to the whereabouts of the Mennonite people—

knowledge that would be put to use in future years in Europe.

For CF as for David Toews, repaying this great debt incurred in being rescued out of the jaws of communism, was a matter of conscience. It was a commitment that Mary shared with him. She was his unpaid secretary often typing and dispatching as many as 200 letters per month, as well as keeping the accounts straight and doing the banking. She also had to hold the fort at home while he criss-crossed the country from Ontario to British Columbia collecting what he could where he could. Actually the network of volunteers organized to assist in this task was truly amazing—an example of grass roots brotherhood at work.

The administrative Board in Rosthern consisted of Toews as chairman, D.P. Enns as secretary treasurer, and Katherine Hooge as office secretary. Klassen would do the collecting out of his own home in Winnipeg, since his work also put him under the Canadian Colonization Association of the CPR in Winnipeg, directed by T.O.F. Herzer. In each of the five provinces there were provincial representatives of the immigrants and also district representatives. The immigrants in the five provinces were organized into 250 districts with each district choosing its own '*Distriktmann*.' In 1928 '*Vertrauensmaenner*' (confidants) were also appointed, one year at a time, to assist the district leaders in appraising the financial ability of every '*Reiseschuld*' debtor—could they pay or not? These were all voluntary positions held by men who themselves had to earn a living for their families and pay off their own debts. In their own need they were serving their brothers and were experiencing the blessings of real brotherhood—a network of living relationships spanning provincial and denominational boundaries. It would not be so in better times and that is why the Lord warned the people, through His servant Moses:

Take heed lest you forget the Lord your God, by not keeping His commandments ... lest, when you have eaten and are full, and have built goodly houses and live in them, and when your herds and flocks multiply ... then your heart be lifted up, and you forget the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt and out of the house of bondage. (Deut 8:11-14)

The Board was financed by commissions from the CPR on

the pre-paid tickets of immigrants coming from Russia. This amounted to \$5,702 for the period from 1923 to 1930. Added to this was a \$3.00 levy on all immigrants between the ages of twelve and sixty. This produced an additional \$28,580 for the same period—a total of \$33,000 for seven years which works out to about \$4,700 per year, hardly enough to pay three full-time employees as well as office rent and travel expenses! In 1930 it was decided that another \$3.00 levy should be made. These levies were collected along with the *Reiseschuld*, making an already unpleasant task even a little more onerous. Basically the system worked because David Toews believed in self-denial and Paul's principle, that if 'you have food and clothing, with these you shall be content.' His example certainly was an inspiration to his fellow workers and Board members.

The chief obstacles in the collection of the '*Reiseschuld*' were negative attitudes and negligence. D.P. Enns, treasurer of the Board from its founding until his death in 1944, summarized it like this: "It is and remains true, that the payment of the *Reiseschuld* is not only an economic problem, but most of all dependent upon a spiritual attitude with respect to the willingness or unwillingness to pay" (Epp p.289). Those who regarded the debt as a holy obligation, whittled away at it little by little and were surprised when the task was completed. Those looking for excuses were always able to find some and were surprised how long the matter dragged on. Notions that the CPR was wealthy and could wait, became the attitude of many. Some husbands without a debt refused to honor their wife's debt. Some children refused to help their aging parents clear their debt. Some believed that attendance at a Bible school was good enough reason not to have to pay. Even some ministers of the Gospel proved to be among the hard-core cases. Some of the difficulties CF experienced in collecting the *Reiseschuld* and some of the challenges to his own faith, are reflected in his letters to Toews and in his reports to the Board. Here are a few examples from the early thirties:

"I have found that many of our immigrants, who have already been in this country four, five, six or seven years, have paid very little or nothing on their transportation debt. They don't look upon this

neglect as sin. Among these are also ministers, who every Sunday call their congregations to repentance, but who excuse themselves pharisaically from the responsibilities of the *Reiseschuld*...."

"C.W....promised to pay \$100 this week but I don't have faith in his promises any more...he should have an official letter that his case is being turned over to the CPR...."

"The first thing the district representative said to me was: 'Why don't you have a meeting in our area? I can't silence the evil tongues any more.' One debtor boldly insisted, that even if he would pay, he would send his money directly to the CPR and not to the Board so as not to feed unnecessary office workers...."

"An especially difficult case here is H-372. This man has paid nothing, not even the board levy. He has six quarters of land, purchased much new inventory when the old would still have been good enough, has fifteen horses and a car...."

"From Yarrow I am being informed that hop-picking begins on August 20 and ends late September and that I should be there if we expect to collect anything...."

"The district representative is worthless...He owes \$1,600, doesn't pay a cent, and doesn't encourage others to pay. No one has lifted a finger to raise the board levy...."

"A-194 is a proud man, a former landed proprietor in Russia...considers it below his dignity to give information to the collector...his *Reiseschuld* is looked upon as the last of his obligations...."

"Our most difficult case is F-64. He hasn't paid a cent yet. He is selfish and narrow-minded. With this man my patience almost gave out. But I retained control of myself, because I believed that my friendly approach would win out with him in the end...."

"F-393 is not a bad man, but his wife is of a profane character...besides she is the boss...."

"Morden is a neglected district...There were too few young people at the meeting and also too few women...the role of the latter in debt collection is not to be underestimated...."

"D-300 hadn't come to the meeting and so he had scolded that I had publicized his debts...when the wives hear about the *Reiseschuld* and when they are persuaded about the need to pay the debt, then the work in most of the homes is much easier...." (Epp 290-2).

The negative attitudes of some of the debtors, disturbing as

they were, did not overshadow in CF's mind the sacrifices that many made to clear their debt as soon as possible. The woman that came after him with a kettle of boiling water and the man who said the return of the Lord was too imminent to bother about debts, were after all exceptions. He was deeply moved by widows who assisted in the grain harvest, setting up stooks to pay off their debt. There was also the classic case of a minister renting a twelve acre farm near Calgary for \$15 per month, who had one horse, one cow, two heifers, four calves, 150 chickens, seven turkeys and five geese. During the course of one year he paid \$1. in January, \$2. in February, \$3. in March and so on, which totalled \$78 in that year. At this rate he soon had his *Reiseschuld* paid.

Not many were that systematic. There was also the case of a family that arrived in 1926 and was faced with a debt of \$933.75. They began conscientiously to pay as best they could, a little here, a little there. In 1931 when the oldest married she was not even able to buy a coat because all her earnings had gone toward the *Reiseschuld*. Their sixteen year old son earned \$51 during the harvest in the summer of 1935 and wanted to buy a horse to complete a team of four for the family, but they agreed it should go toward the *Reiseschuld*. Another daughter was earning \$10 a month doing house work and most of it went toward the *Reiseschuld*. When she found out that there was just \$91.74 left to pay she took another \$10 out of her meagre savings, and in this way the total, which together with interest was \$1,166.91, was all paid off on October 11, 1935. It took this family ten years. These were the kind of situations that blessed CF's heart, and that he often spoke about to encourage others.

It was clear that he carried the task of the debt collection as a solemn duty. In the present age of massive national debts and a credit-card mentality it is perhaps hard to grasp the seriousness with which our forefathers viewed indebtedness. They are to be admired for their faithfulness and determination. And CF's commitment to this task undoubtedly enhanced the image of this hard-working people. As he reflected in a speech in Rosthern in 1939 he was concerned about the reputation of his people in the eyes of the world. He had recently read Murray Gibbon's book 'The Canadian Mosaic' in which the 1892 repayment of \$100,000

by the Mennonites to the Manitoba government is mentioned. "When the minister of the Interior announced this he said, 'In the entire history of our country there has been no instance of either a group or an individual dealing more honestly with the government than in the instance of the Mennonites. Not a single settler or farmer has attempted to go back on his promise' (HFK mss 46). CF adds his hope that this might again be said of the current debt. "Will those who follow us also be in the fortunate position of benefitting from the blessings of our fulfilled promises?" He had learned his lesson well from his father years ago in Russia. 'Remember that all you do reflects on me, for you bear my name.' He wanted the people of Menno to be a true reflection not only of their forefather, but also of their heavenly Father who seeks not to be a burden to any but rather to bless all men.

## Chapter 8

### FAMILY MATTERS

*"But seek first the kingdom of God... (Matthew 6:33).*

In the spring of 1931 CF began to look for a more suitable house to rent. With three children and a fourth on the way, the Woodhaven house was becoming too small. It was also not a very suitable location. The greatest concentration of their Mennonite friends was in North End Winnipeg, so when a house turned up in Seven Oaks they moved from the southern outskirts of Winnipeg to the northern outskirts. At this time they also began attending the little MB church on College Avenue in the North End that was being pastored by CN Hiebert. Many of their Russian Mennonite friends attended this church.

On July 20, 1931 Mary went into hospital and to everyone's surprise non-identical twin girls were born. The one with darker hair was named Irmgard after Mary's older sister, and the fairer one was named Justina after Cornelius' mother. Cornelius was overjoyed and wrote an ecstatic letter to David Toews saying they were hoping for a girl and received not one but two. Their joy was somewhat dampened when it became clear that Justina, whom they called Tinalie, had a stroke shortly after birth and was paralyzed on one side. Hard days followed, but Mary was not one to complain. About this time she was also told that she had a suspicious tumor in her abdomen, but she refused surgery and testified that God had called her to an important task and that she was trusting Him.

Healthy twins can be a real handful, but with one an invalid,

Mary's days and nights were filled with work. Their good family friend, Dr. Rudolph Claassen, whom they considered as a relative, had come across with the family from Russia, and was now a great help in these trying times. He came to the house whether night or day and did all he could to be of help to Mary and Tinalie. Having tasted grief himself when his oldest daughter died from inadvertently eating poisonous berries, he was able to empathize with Mary. He was a great help too, when her third son came down with appendicitis at the age of three and had to be rushed in for surgery. These emergencies seemed to arise when Cornelius was gone and it was a comfort to be able to call 'Onkel Rudolph.'

In September 1932 the family moved once more, this time to 476 Powers Street in the North End quite close to the MB church. While the number of Cornelius' offspring were increasing, his own brothers and sisters were leaving the family nest. This summer his oldest sister Justina was married to Dietrich Peters, the son of the well-known preacher Abram Peters; and his brother Jacob married Dietrich's sister Elly Peters. In short order John would marry Olga Perk and move to Ontario, Nick would marry Irma Delesky and eventually lead the way to British Columbia, Agatha would marry Emmanuel Horch the violinist, and Alec would marry Gertie Cunningham and also move to British Columbia. Because of his constant traveling Cornelius was able to fulfil his role as oldest brother and keep in fairly close contact with them all. He had, as we've already seen, a strong sense of family and took a genuine interest in their welfare and that of their children. Not all of them were walking with the Lord and this burden weighed on his heart and was expressed in his prayers.

### **Two Deaths in the Family**

The scattering of the siblings coincided with the death of Cornelius' mother on June 26, 1933. In writing to David Toews the day after her death (on his son Walfried's sixth birthday) Cornelius expressed his sense of loss,

Nothing can take the place of a praying mother. She always had an open ear for our troubles. Many heavy things lost their severity once we had shared them with mother; and many good

and beautiful things became even more precious after we had shared them with her. I was her oldest son. After father's death she clung closer than ever to me. She was always glad to see me on my return from collecting trips. Many a public figure has co-workers that others never see or hear about. This is how I felt about her. Faithfully she remembered my work, day in and day out. How often after being with her, did I return to my work strengthened. And all this is now a thing of the past. She really appreciated the evening you came and prayed with her. You quoted the stanza of a song, 'Endlich kommt Er leise, nimmt uns bei der Hand, fuehrt uns von der Reise, heim ins Vaterland' (Finally God comes quietly, takes us by the hand, and leads us from this sojourn, into His heavenly land). I was reminded of that yesterday at 10:40 in the morning when she passed quietly out of this life— after an intense struggle throughout the night. All her children, seven sons and three daughters, were present with her during the night. This was a great comfort to her. How grateful we are that the entire family is together here in Canada, and that she didn't have to die somewhere all alone in obscurity. What a blessing that we could close her eyelids and know that she is with the Lord.

CF also expressed his regret to Toews at not being able to be at the Conference of Mennonites of Canada in Gnadenenthal, Manitoba, and invited Toews to the funeral which would take place just after the close of the conference. The funeral took place at the little MB church on College Avenue and she was buried at the Brookside cemetery. This led to Nick, Agatha, and Elfrieda moving in with Cornelius and Mary, and Alec moving in with Franz and Katja— but this wouldn't be for long.

Little Tinalie's condition was deteriorating and after a hard winter she passed away in February 1934, having been with the family for two and a half years. The funeral at the North End MB church was a sad occasion, but it was also a great relief for the family to know that she was released from her suffering. Despite her handicap Tinalie had a cheerful disposition and the other children had enjoyed wheeling her about in her 'carriage' and entertaining her. She was buried next to her grandmother and namesake in the Brookside cemetery.

During the summer there was considerable discussion afoot about a total reorganization of the Board. Besides the Board there was also a Central Mennonite Immigrant Committee (ZMIK) and a Mennonite Land Settlement Board (MLSB). The MLSB had gradually become obsolete through the efficient work of the Canadian Colonization Association, a branch of the CPR that was

run out of a Winnipeg office under the direction of T.O.F. Herzer, a sympathetic friend of the Mennonites. The other two Boards it was agreed should amalgamate. A plan was worked out and presented by Toews to the MB and GC conferences in the summer of 1934. There would be an enlarged Board of twenty two men, representing the three major Mennonite conferences, nominated by the existing Boards. Neither Toews nor Klassen assumed that they would be on the new Board. Toews would only do it at the request of both conferences, which did take place, and he became the chairman of the reorganized Board.

CF expressed his concerns to Toews in a confidential letter of June 20, 1934,

Regarding my candidacy, I must confess I was at the point of asking you to drop my name, but I have come to the conviction not to do that. Since you have included my name let it stand. When I consider the job at hand and the work to be done I believe it would be better that way. This much is certain, should either conference declare itself negatively about my nomination (I know that in some circles I'm considered not MB enough and in others not GC enough) I will take that as a sign that I am to withdraw. This might not be well received by the CPR when they first hear of it, but then again, nobody is indispensable.

As it turned out his nomination was acceptable to both conferences, so his work of collecting the Reiseschuld continued on unabated. On the new Board with him was his good friend Franz C. Thiessen who had moved to Winnipeg from Rosthern and lived just around the corner from them. Mary had a good friend in Mrs. Thiessen and in the daughters Lydia, Irene and Martha. The youngest daughter, Ruth, as we will see, would later marry into the Klassen family.

The new Board had five sub-committees: 1) Organization, 2) Finance, 3) Settlement, 4) Relief, and 5) Culture. CF was chairman of the Organization Committee and the Finance Committee. His good friend Gerhard Sawatzky from Port Rowan, Ontario was chairman of the Settlement Committee; C.A. DeFehr of the Relief Committee; and D.H. Epp of the Culture Committee, assisted by J.J. Thiessen and F.C. Thiessen. The relationship between the men on the Board was congenial and the meetings fruitful. When the Board or its Committees met in Winnipeg, the members from

the other provinces often stayed overnight with the Klassens. Mary was a warm hostess and these men of God really blessed the household. None more so than David Toews himself, who had a wonderful way of drawing out the hopes and aspirations of the children. His benediction carried a spiritual authority with it and a manifest blessing that was long remembered.

### **Mary's Baptism**

At the North End MB church a close bond was developing between the Klassens and the Hieberts. C.N. Hiebert was the pastor of the church and an ardent soul-winner. Mary found that through the experience she had gone through with Tinalie the Lord was drawing her closer to Himself. It was during one of C.N. Hiebert's visits that Mary experienced a spiritual deepening which caused her to desire to affirm her faith by following the Lord in believer's baptism. The date was eventually set for August 4, 1935.

This was an exciting day for the whole family. The baptism took place in the Assiniboine River on the south-western outskirts of Winnipeg. CF drove the family there in the 1931 black Chevrolet, which the CCA supplied for his *Reiseschuld* work. Tents had been set up on the river bank where those being baptized could change. Many friends besides those from the North End church were gathered there along the river. C.N. Hiebert did the baptizing. They waded out together and then he asked her whether she really believed with all her heart that Jesus Christ was her Savior and Lord. She said yes, and he immersed her, to be 'buried with Christ, and raised to newness of life in Him.' She had come a long way since her youth in the Lutheran Church in Riga. Cornelius was deeply moved and grateful to God that Mary was taking this step. It was an object lesson too that the children would never forget. CF's own baptism in the Tock River in central Russia came vividly back to mind. That same evening there was a meeting at the North End church at which, after the 'breaking of bread,' both Cornelius and Mary were welcomed into the fellowship. A good friend of the family, Rev. Jacob Epp (father of the honorable Jake Epp MP) from Glenlea, Manitoba, preached the

sermon based on Matthew's account of Jesus' baptism in Matthew chapter 3. Shortly after the baptism the family packed up the Chevy and motored off to Rabbit Lake near Kenora, where a cabin was rented for a week's holiday. Cornelius was an enthusiastic camper. He enjoyed swimming and boating with the children and was great at motivating the rest to pick their bowl of wild blueberries before breakfast. He also took a delight in getting the wood stove roaring and in trying his hand in the kitchen. This became the family's favorite vacation spot in summers to come. On one occasion a cabin was rented at Winnipeg Beach on Lake Manitoba. On cloudy days CF liked to pull out his stamp collection and do some sorting together with the older children. He was quite a collector at heart. He accumulated quite an extensive coin collection as well during the course of his travels. He was also an avid photographer taxing Mary's patience to the limit at times. They were quite a contrast; he enjoyed collecting, and she enjoyed giving things away. It was part of her generous nature. These were depression days, and when she became aware of a family with more mouths than food to go around, she filled up the children's wagon with groceries and towed it to them.

## **Mennonite World Conference in Amsterdam**

In December 1935 CF received a letter from Harold Bender encouraging him to come to the third Mennonite World Conference in Amsterdam in June. He didn't need much coaxing and he would have loved to take Mary with him, but money was scarce and the children were still too young to be left alone, thought Mary. If Canada could just send one representative he was sure it should be David Toews. Toews, however, thought it would be wonderful if they could go together again. After further encouragement from conferences and friends it was agreed that they would both go. It was a long and time-consuming journey by train and ship but the fellowship they enjoyed and the stimulation of the conference itself made it all worthwhile.

The focus of the Conference was on the historical roots of the Mennonites in Holland, going all the way back to Menno Simons' exodus out of the Roman Catholic church to become the

leader of the persecuted Anabaptists. Many of the same leaders that were in Danzig in 1930 were there again representing the history and present state of the Mennonite church in their part of the world: van der Zijpp for Holland, Neff for Germany, Geiser for Switzerland and France, Unruh for Russia, Bender for the United States, and Toews for Canada. Orie Miller reported on American Mennonite Missions and P.C. Hiebert on the MCC.

CF did a brief opening devotion on the last day of the conference. It reveals his heart and we will quote it in full:

Dear brothers and sisters!

Many of us, who were able to participate in the previous World Conference in Danzig left that assembly with an inner sense of satisfaction and now come to this one in great anticipation of what the Lord will do. We are conscious that God has new responsibilities for us to take up, and even if we look upon the plight of our Russian brethren as an insurmountable challenge, humanly speaking, we are nevertheless convinced that when the Lord gives an assignment He also grants the gifts to accomplish it. He grants the necessary wisdom, the inspiration, and the necessary material resources to proceed. Our God can accomplish great things in our day as well!

"As a basis for the deliberations of this day we place the words of the Psalmist in Psalm 84:6-7 'Blessed are they whose strength is in Thee; who follow Thee with their whole heart; who dig wells while passing through the valley of sorrows.'

It is without doubt a great privilege to have been raised in a Christian home; and if by the grace of God we also came to the conviction that of ourselves we could do no good thing, but are fully dependent on God who revealed Himself to us in His Son, and were able to receive the gift of eternal salvation by faith as a personal experience, then we are indeed blessed. And if we realized that we had to let the Lord equip us with His strength for the duties of every day, we looked upon our work in an altogether different light. In doing so we entered the category of people the Psalmist calls 'blessed'—for the Lord is their strength and they can dig wells in this valley of sorrows.

As we have heard men at this conference from different countries present lectures reviewing our history, thankfulness has welled up in our hearts. How significant it is that men like Menno Simons found the Lord to be his strength, and that he was able to dig wells in the midst of the woes of his time, wells from which we today, four hundred years later are still drawing water. We are

thankful too that during the 400 years of our history God continually gave us men like this who found their strength in Him, who followed Him and dug wells that could nourish succeeding generations.

As I participate in a Mennonite Congress such as this and see the many whose hair is greying—our fathers in Christ—who today have Christ as their strength, it gives me a sense of security for our brotherhood and for our common task.

But the Lord is calling our fathers in the faith to Himself one after the other, and we younger ones sometimes wonder whether the 'sons' will really be able to fill the positions vacated by them. This causes me, and many a younger brother with me, to feel somewhat anxious. Maybe those of us overseas experience this even more than you here in the 'old country.' May we of the younger generation take up the challenge in gratitude to God for our Anabaptist fathers and mothers and for all the men of the past and for those today who align themselves with the triune God and His Holy Word. These things born of His Spirit and transmitted to us by the Lord, will not pass away quickly or lightly. Christ's promises are still valid. Certainly the spiritual awakenings of the past have risen and fallen like great waves, and in our own brotherhood there have been high points and low points, but taken as a whole we have every reason to believe God has even greater things in store for us than we have already seen. 'Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever.'

Our dear brother Neff brought this truth very near to our hearts already last Sunday at the 'Mennonitentag' in Gronau, and I regret the fact that our entire Mennonite youth throughout the world was not able to hear the testimony of this trusted sage and warrior out of our ranks.

As we glance back over 400 years of history we must confess humbly that it is not because of our strengths but rather despite our weaknesses that we have moved forward. That is one of the proofs that a higher power is at work transcending our shortcomings. But this fact doesn't relieve us of our responsibility. Everyone has his part to play. For our brotherhood as a whole, it is still true, that more hinges on the sanctification of your life and mine, on the faithfulness of your testimony and mine, and the fervency of your prayers and mine, and on the generosity of your giving and mine, than we could ever have guessed.

At night on the edge of a battlefield against the dark trees a lonely sentry can be seen. He is supposed to remain alert and perform his simple duty. But as he stands there he muses about great things. If only he were the general, what mighty feats he could accomplish. What victories he could win; what praises he could earn. How wonderful that would be! But as he dreams he fails to detect

the enemy's advance. The ensuing battle is lost. His faithfulness could have meant a victory; his failure meant defeat. Dear friends, may God help each of us to recognize our responsibility and do our part.

Yesterday brother Unruh portrayed in gripping fashion the fate of our brothers in Russia. We shudder at the thought that for eighteen years already, they have been tested to the breaking point. And yet, again and again over the years, God has provided ways and means for us to relieve at least some of the need— as the chairman of our Relief Committee will describe for us this evening. We are grateful to our heavenly Father for this and also to our brethren in Europe and America who have pioneered this work and have not grown weary in it. Today too is the day of God's triumphs." "Brothers and sisters, we too want to place ourselves at God's disposal, so that as a result of this Conference fresh determination will be injected into the blood of our Mennonite youth. We want to make every effort to claim, what we have inherited from our forefathers, that we might truly possess it and express it in our daily lives. Then, and only then, will those who follow us be able to say of us: they belonged to those whose strength was the Lord, who followed Him, and dug wells in the midst of the woes and sorrows of their day.

May God in His grace grant it. Amen.

This brief devotional reveals the heart of CF. He was first of all a man filled with a deep gratitude for the forgiveness of sins with a very real personal experience of salvation in Christ. His love for the Word was coupled with a ready ability to see where it touches our lives. His deep respect for our spiritual fathers brought with it loyalty to the people of God, and a capacity to take up the burden of others and to persevere in it. Demonstrated on this occasion was his gift of inspiring and challenging others. There seems no doubt that a fire had been kindled in his life and that his heart was set on denying himself, taking up his cross, and following Jesus. And this was happening in the midst of the grim depression years, when Stalin's crimes against his own countrymen in Russia were shocking the world and Hitler's fanaticism was gaining frightening momentum in Germany.

Once back in Canada the work of collecting the *Reiseschuld* continued on. One of the more dramatic moments in the *Reise schuld* epoch was the celebration in Coaldale, Alberta on Sunday September 19, 1937 when the Mennonite brotherhood honored the CPR and the Canadian Colonization Association through their

representatives Sir Edward Beatty and Colonel J.S. Dennis. The Board in organizing the event, was determined that this great act of trust by the CPR must be remembered. It was a gala occasion with lots of pomp and ceremony. Toews and Janz and Klassen were in their element. The MB church had been decorated in harvest thanksgiving style. Even more impressive than all the official greetings and speeches was the presentation of bouquets by twelve ten year old girls all born in Russia. They laid the flowers at Sir Edward Beatty and Colonel Dennis' feet and said in unison, "You saved our lives. We thank you." Many were moved to tears, and even some of the honored guests showed signs of deep emotion. Toews assured the dignitaries , that "our people will not only pay their transportation debt to the last cent, but will also prove to be upright and dependable citizens in their new homeland." The celebration concluded with a prayer and an enthusiastic singing of 'God save the King.'

These feelings of loyalty to their new homeland found further expression on the occasion of the Royal Visit to Canada in June 1939. Elder David Toews on behalf of the Board and all the Mennonites of Canada, was able to present the Royal couple with a document expressing their loyalty and gratitude. CF drove his family to Portage la Prairie in order to catch a closer glimpse of the King and Queen. The royal train stopped briefly and the Royal couple alighted to greet the cheering crowds. The Klassens pressed in real close and got a good view of their monarch—the boys even laid pennies on the track to be driven over by the royal train. It was only two months later that Canada declared war on Germany— an act that put some of this loyalty to the test.

## Chapter 9

### WAR AND PEACE

*"But I say unto you, love your enemies . . ." (Luke 6:27).*

Not long after Canada declared war, an Order in Council called for the registration of all aliens whose racial origin was either German or Italian. It was CF who wrote to the RCMP in Manitoba letting them know that the immigrants from Russia were for the most part of Dutch stock. When an RCMP official came to the house to discuss the matter, the children remember how their mother made a special point of having the record "There'll always be an England" playing in the background. This was no form of deceit on her part. She sensed earlier than her husband and many other Mennonites that Hitler was not to be trusted. She was deeply disturbed by his arrogance and cruel fanaticism and her intuition proved to be right. The racial origin question produced considerable confusion among the Mennonites, with some registering as Dutch, others German, some as Polish and even Swiss. It was generally agreed however that about 90% of the General Conference Mennonites and Mennonite Brethren of Canada were of Dutch descent.

The peace position that CF had come to in Russia was now put to the test. He assumed with other Mennonites that the Militia Act of 1868 provided for exemption from active military service for an individual "who from the doctrines of his religion is adverse to bearing arms." The wording was significant. Mennonites were not exempt as a body, but the burden of proof rested on each claimant. It was a matter of conscience.

CF had been one of the twenty signatories of the "Mennonite Peace Manifesto" drawn up at the 1936 World Conference in Amsterdam. It read in part "We...believing in the Gospel of Jesus Christ which calls men to promote peace and to stand against the sin of war...appeal to all our brothers and sisters to witness actively to our peace principles and to our desire to render service in the Spirit of Christ" (J.A. Toews p. 28).

In March 1939, CF along with Toews and Janz was at a meeting in Chicago where representatives of seven Mennonite conferences gathered to deliberate on the peace question. They agreed on the following:

We note with concern the growing tide of ill will and antagonism toward certain foreign nations amounting almost to hatred, coupled with a spirit which seems to us in many respects to reflect a war psychology, and which may even have begun to affect our own people. As non-resistant Christians who desire to maintain the spirit of active goodwill and love toward all men, according to the spirit, example, and teaching of Jesus, even toward those who might be thought to be our enemies, we should seek to guard ourselves against this spirit and do all in our power to demonstrate in a practical way the spirit of love and helpfulness to all (Epp 327).

Two months later in Winkler, Manitoba representatives of nine Canadian Mennonite conferences gathered. Toews and C.F. Klassen were responsible for calling the meeting. B.B. Janz spoke for the MBs and expressed a willingness to do non-combatant service in the medical corps as a form of alternative service. Most of the so-called 'Kanadier' (descendants of those who came to Canada in the 1874-80 emigration) were opposed to the idea of noncombatant service. Their exemption during the first World War had gone so smoothly that they saw no need to try to be more accommodating or relevant. The 'Russlaender,' who had come in the 1923-30 emigration were more open to alternative service in the Medical Corps since some of them had done similar service in Russia during World War I.

A year later CF was in Ontario involved in the organization of the Canadian Conference of Historic Peace Churches. This involved the Mennonites along with the Quakers and the Church of the Brethren. This was followed by a dominion wide meeting

in Saskatoon. It was decided at this meeting to send a joint delegation to Ottawa to lay the groundwork for an alternative service program. On November 12, 1940 Klassen along with Toews, Janz and E.J. Swalm met with the deputy minister of the Department of National War Services. Their suggestions were not favorably received so they returned to Ottawa on November 22 to meet with the Honorable J.G. Gardiner, Minister of National War Services. At this time an alternative service program was agreed upon and the first call-up of young men was scheduled for May 29, 1941. The alternative service program took three forms: 1) work camps in national parks, 2) service in agriculture and essential industries, and 3) service in the Army Medical Corps and the Canadian Dental Corps.

Many of the young men who were called up in Manitoba came to see CF to counsel with him. He challenged many of them to be clear in their own hearts about their relationship to the Lord so that they could answer the judge out of true conviction. Some of the men were intimidated quite badly by their rough treatment at the hands of a certain Judge Adamson. This offended Cornelius and he became quite indignant in his heart toward the Judge. At one point the Lord convicted him of his bad attitude and he went to the Judge and confessed his sin and asked for forgiveness. The judge said: "But Mr. Klassen, you have never shown it outwardly, you have always behaved correctly. There is nothing to forgive. You are a perfect gentleman." CF's reply was, that being a gentleman wasn't good enough, he wanted to be a Christian and he wanted forgiveness and peace.

About this time, the family remembers, a notorious criminal was sentenced to be hanged at Headingly jail just outside Winnipeg. CF felt the Holy Spirit urging him to do something. He was finally able to arrange to see the inmate and to share the gospel with him. He also appealed to the authorities for clemency.

## **Mennonite Central Relief Committee Formed**

With the outbreak of the war Klassen's heart was also drawn out to become active in the relief effort for war-torn Europe. He knew by experience something of the great need that is inflicted

upon people during war time, and he wanted to do his part in ministering to that need. Along with Toews and Janz they organized provincial committees in support of the relief efforts; January 12, 1940 for Manitoba in Altona, January 19 for Saskatchewan in Saskatoon, January 30 for Alberta in Coaldale, and February 5 for British Columbia in Yarrow. These provincial committees then sent representatives to a central committee which on March 15 was organized in Winnipeg as the Mennonite Central Relief Committee for western Canada, with Toews as chairman, Janz as vice chairman, Klassen as secretary-treasurer. This committee would work in close cooperation with the MCC in Akron Pennsylvania.

The MCC had sent two men to investigate service possibilities in England, France, and Poland in October 1939, and when they recommended service among displaced children and evacuated families in England, Ted Claassen from Kansas was sent to organize it. John Coffmann, professor at Goshen College, but from Ontario, was the first volunteer from Canada. The second was Peter J. Dyck from Laird Saskatchewan in July 1941, and the third was Cornelius' sister Elfrieda, a registered nurse, who went over in May 1942. They did a great job in administering homes in the Birmingham and Manchester areas for children and older people who were evacuated from bombed areas in southern England.

The Mennonite Central Relief Committee of western Canada sent its first shipment of clothing to England in August 1941. By spring of the following year they were supporting the relief work in England with \$1,250 per month. Cornelius kept in close contact with the work through personal correspondence with Peter and Elfrieda and reported at church conferences on the challenge they were facing and appealed for donations.

### **Reiseschuld concluded**

What was happening to the *Reiseschuld* collection during the war? The outbreak of the War coincided with the end of the drought and the end of the depression. With an upswing in the economy it became easier for people to pay on their *Reiseschuld*.

Early in the war years Springstein, Manitoba and Vineland, Ontario wiped out their debts completely. With the end in sight many took fresh courage. It was not only better prices for hogs, beef, dairy and poultry products that brought in increased payments, but as he mentioned in one of his many letters to Toews "both our conferences have been devoting more time and interest to the *Reiseschuld* question in the last few years." He also rejoiced at the news that church leaders were putting pressure on able but unwilling debtors. In 1942 both the MB and GC Conferences recommended that special committees be appointed to counsel with delinquent debtors. In Coaldale a list was circulated with the names and debts entered on it. The pressure was on, and some resented it, but not wanting to lose face they pitched in. Out of 267 parties in the Coaldale district sixty-three still owed part or all of their *Reiseschuld*.

The CPR contributed to the acceleration by cancelling the interest on the principal from 1930 onward. This amounted to close to one million dollars. Excitement was growing at the prospect of completing the task. Some who paid off their own debt began to heap fiery coals on their neighbors by beginning to pay on theirs. By 1943 sixty two districts had liquidated their debts. By late 1945 Alberta became the first province to complete the task. Early in 1946 British Columbia and Ontario followed suit. David Toews, however, due to deafness and increasing weakness caused by diabetes, had to resign in April 1946. His wife had died of cancer in 1941. After the fall harvest the last two provinces, Manitoba and Saskatchewan, also completed the task.

November 19, 1946 was an historic day. J.J. Thiessen, the new chairman of the Board and a long-time associate, was able to take the good news to Toews. Toews thought they were just trying to comfort him in his sickness, but as the truth of it hit him he broke out in uncontrolled weeping, as the two million dollar debt that he had signed for in 1923 rolled off his heart. Finally he could rest in peace. The commitment to the CPR had been fully met. A few months later on February 25 he passed into the presence of his Lord. But CF who had worked so closely together with Toews, and should have been around to rejoice over the great liquidation, was thousands of miles away engaged in what was to become the greatest mission of his life.

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# III. EUROPE

## 1945-1954

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### Prologue

As the war in Europe came to a close in 1945 CF had already been a resident of Canada for sixteen years. He was in the prime of his life and had been busily occupied during this period as we have seen. Yet in a real sense, unlike many men who went to war in the forties and experienced the greatest challenges and excitement of their lives, for CF the war years were a waiting time. He sensed too that once the bombs and guns ceased, the great aftermath of war would present its agonizing challenges. So just at the time when other men were gratefully returning home to nurse their wounds and resume normal lives with jobs and families, CF began to lift his sights to the opportunities for service back across the ocean in Europe.

History celebrates the great men who moved armies and established kingdoms. But who will dare to move the vast hordes of homeless, sick and decrepit people left in the wake of these

military feats? They are the greater challenge—the odds hindering their resettlement, poverty, disease, age and death are far more frustrating. Great generals display bravado and courage; the qualities for the other task are those of the spirit, compassion, long suffering, patience and quiet determination. For this task CF was the man of the hour. So as the soldiers of World War II were laying down their arms this soldier of peace was preparing to end the long years of waiting and begin again to search for his brethren.

Concern for those that had remained in Russia when he left in the fall of 1928, continued with him all through his *Reiseschuld* years—deepened by his attendance at the Mennonite World Relief Conference in Danzig in 1930 and the one in Amsterdam in 1936. During the war little bits of news came through of great upheavals and destruction among the Russian Mennonites and of flights westward and exiles eastward.

# RUSSIA



Franz Klassen Family, 1914, with CF center rear



CF as High School Grad,  
Karassan, 1910



CF and Peter Froese, Moscow, 1921



**CF with Mary and son, Harold, Moscow, 1927**

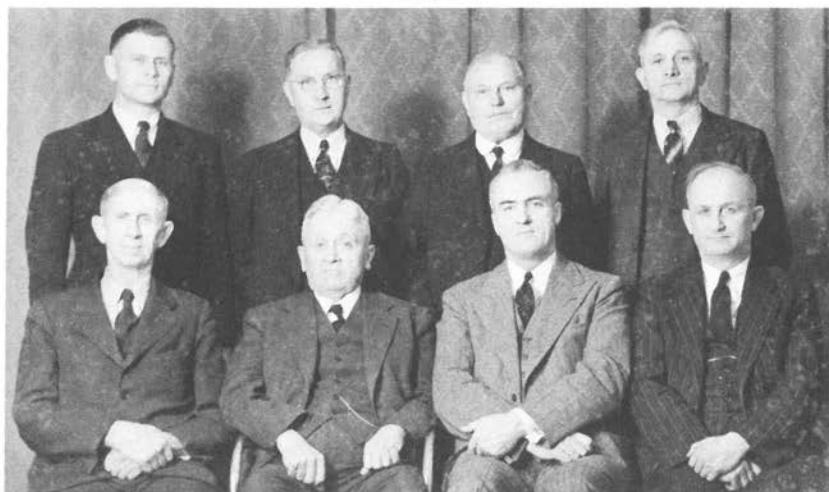


**Executive of the All-Russian Mennonite Agricultural Union, 1928**  
**From left to right—HF Dyck, Peter Froese, CF Klassen**

# CANADA



**CF and Mary with the Donald St. household,  
Winnipeg, 1929**



**Executive of the Canadian Mennonite Board of Colonization, 1935**

Front row, left to right—Janz, Toews, Klassen, Thiessen

Back row—Harder, DeFehr, Derksen, Gerbrandt



CF Klassen Family at Kildonan Park, Winnipeg, 1936

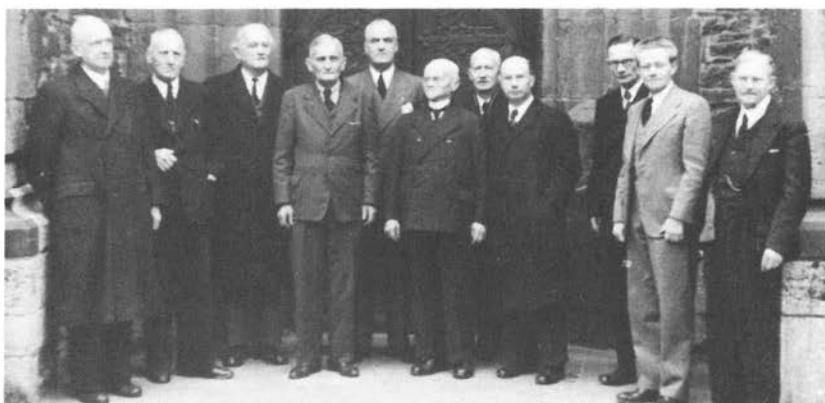


Silver Anniversary, Abbotsford, BC, 1951

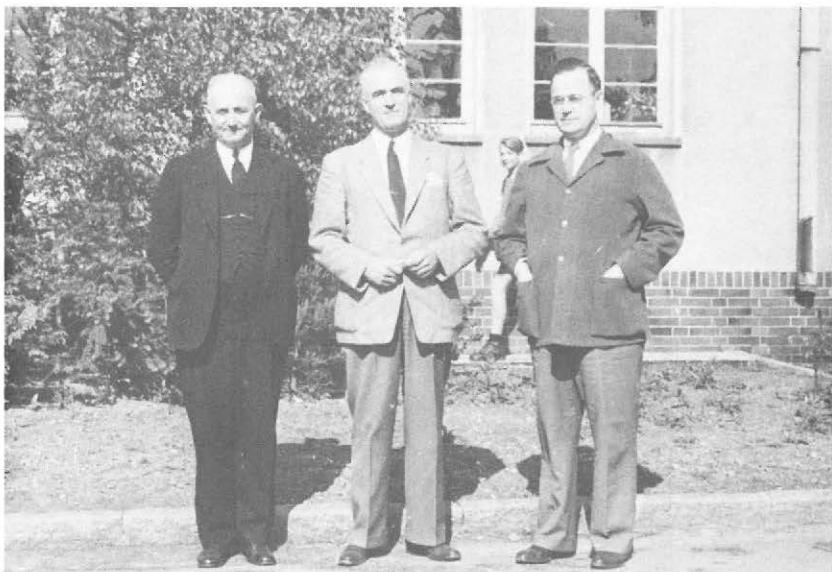
# EUROPE



MCC Executive Members, Europe, 1947  
From left to right—OO Miller, CF Klassen, HS Bender



European Mennonite Leaders, Goettingen, 1948  
From left to right—Rahusen (Gronau), Braun (Palantinate), Unruh (Karlsruhe),  
Driediger (N. Germany), CF, Horsch (Bavaria), Fast (Emden),  
Schowalter (Hamburg), Goltermann (Amsterdam),  
Wall (USA), Crous (Goettingen)



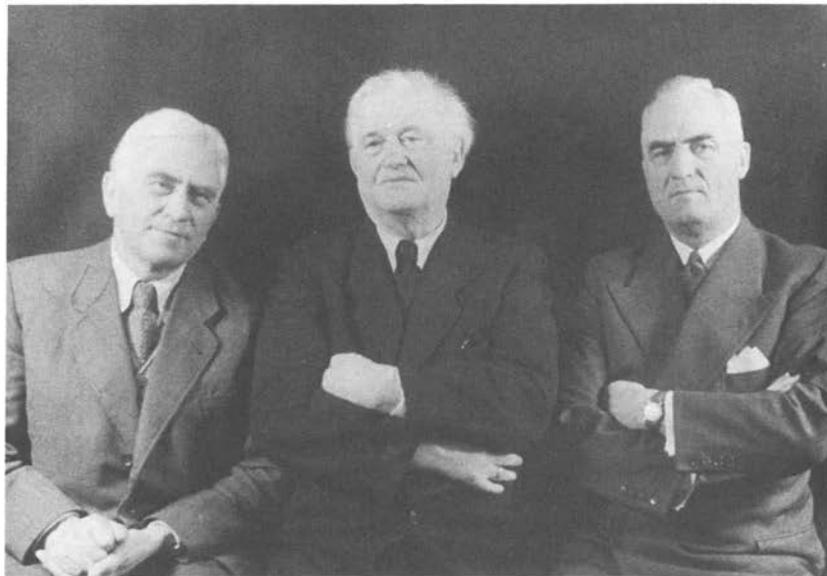
JJ Thiessen, WT Snyder, CF Klassen at the Fallingbostel Refugee Camp, 1949



CF Klassen at the Opening of the Mennonite Old Peoples' Home, Enkenbach, 1949



CF Klassen, His Sister Elfrieda Dyck, Peter J. Dyck in Germany, 1948



Froese, Unruh and Klassen at the Mennonite World Conference, Basel, 1952



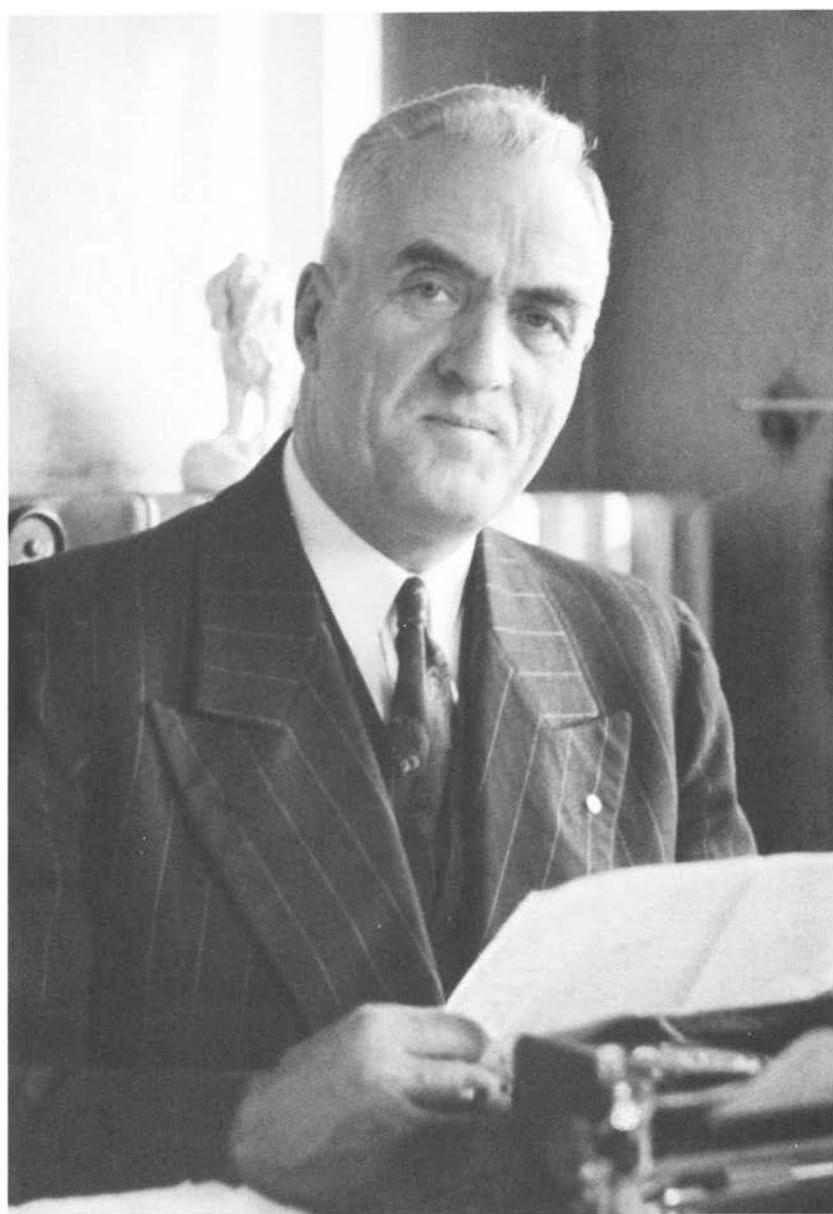
**The Aftermath of War, Germany, 1945**



**Siegfried Janzen and CF Klassen  
in Gronau, 1947**



**A Refugee Embarkation at Bremerhaven, May 1948**



**CF Klassen at Frankfurt, April, 1954**



## Chapter 10

### ‘SEEKING HIS BRETHREN’

*“I am seeking my brothers . . .” (Gen. 37:16).*

On August 6, 1945, the day the Americans dropped an atomic bomb on Hiroshima, the MCC Executive meeting in Chicago, made the decision to send CF as their representative to Europe. It was to be a six week exploratory visit.

CF knew that this was the call of God upon his life, but when he checked things out with his doctor he was seriously warned not to undertake such an assignment. His heart was weak and was acting up periodically necessitating bedrest. Cornelius and Mary prayed about it and agreed that he should go, even against the wishes of their Dr. Rudolph.

Preparations continued and at the Sunday morning service on August 19 at the North End church there was a special commissioning with prayers for his safety and the success of the venture. The next day at the Winnipeg airport he bade farewell to his family and friends. This was the sixth time he was crossing the Atlantic but it was the first time by air. Twenty-four more crossings would follow, before his ministry to his refugee brothers would be sealed with his death.

His first destination in Europe was London, England. Here he came face to face with all the complications of travel permits and visas to get onto the continent. While in London he attended meetings of the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Association (UNRRA). To his surprise the meeting was chaired by a Russian—a little reminder to him of how the Russian presence had

infiltrated the West as soon as the War was concluded. Here he got some details on the magnitude of the post-war refugee problem. An estimated 30,000,000 people were driven from their homes as a result of the war. How terrible! This was almost too much to imagine, more than the total population of Canada! Among them would be thousands of his Russian Mennonite brethren, fleeing from Communism—the details of which would soon become more clear. UNRRA was a result of the combining of the Inter-Governmental Commission on Refugees (IGCR) of 1938 with Nansen's International Office for Refugees. By mid 1945 there were already 300 UNRRA teams caring for displaced persons all over Europe. It was in London that he heard about Prussian Mennonite refugees in Danish refugee camps.

### **Prussian Refugees in Denmark**

The first door that opened for him was to go to Denmark over Stockholm, Sweden. On arrival in Copenhagen, no one seemed to know anything about 'Mennonite' refugees. Three hundred thousand German refugees in all, had been forced upon the Danes and they were not at all happy with the arrangement and were eager to see them returned to Germany. It was a German Jew who had lost everything in the war, but was not embittered by it, who finally helped CF to locate the Prussian Mennonite refugees. There were over 2,000 of them distributed amongst other refugees in thirty different camps.

After a short train and bus journey he arrived at the largest camp and the first one he met was Elder Bruno Ewert, who had been the pastor of a Mennonite church in Heubuden near Danzig. CF had first met him at the second Mennonite World Conference in Danzig in 1930. What an emotion-filled reunion that was. Gradually the story came out.

Just before the War there were about 15,000 Mennonites in East and West Prussia, descendants of persecuted Dutch and north German Mennonites who had fled there 400 years earlier. Things had come to a head in Prussia during the time that the Germans were retreating and the Russians advancing. The Nazis had always assumed that they would be able to contain the Rus-

sians, after all for over a hundred years no foreign enemy had set foot on German soil. That is why the Germans never gave the order to evacuate until it was almost too late. It was consequently done in great haste while the Russian bombs were dropping. Many were killed and many were separated from one another in the confusion. Ewert estimated that of all the Mennonites in Prussia a quarter were killed or lost, another quarter fled to Denmark, and the remainder fled westward through East Germany into West Germany. The ships were bombed as well, and his description of these scenes were hair-raising: screaming, crying, wailing everywhere. Those that made it sailed over Luebeck and Gdingen to Denmark. And, as mentioned, their welcome in Denmark was not a friendly one. The Danish authorities were always searching among them for those who had been active Nazis.

The needs too, in the camps were great, especially in the area of clothing and beds. Many were sleeping on thin layers of straw on concrete floors, and the straw wasn't changed very often. They had been issued military blankets and were told that shoes would be coming. Their inactivity in the camps was also a great burden. Efforts were being made to set up workshops to keep them more active. The wood was to be supplied from Sweden.

At another camp CF met Elder Bruno Enns, who had been a pastor in Orloffertelde, and a Rev. Herman Epp. How shocking to hear first hand how the total Mennonite presence in Prussia/Poland was wiped out to the last man. CF was able to arrange with the authorities for these three men to move more freely from camp to camp to minister to the spiritual needs of their brethren. He hoped that these Danzig refugees would soon be moved to Holland, from where efforts could be made to find places abroad where they could settle.

From Denmark CF returned to London, where he stayed at the London Mennonite Centre at Shepherds Hill, Highgate, while negotiating with the authorities about permission to enter Holland or Germany. Here he met Peter Dyck briefly, who was on his way back to Amsterdam with a truck load of relief supplies. Peter had served with MCC in England for four years and during that time was married to Cornelius' youngest sister Elfrieda—also on MCC service. When the war ended they transferred to MCC work in Holland.

CF's next flight was to Paris, where he met Orie Miller of the MCC Executive Committee and also M.C. Lehman who had flown in from the MCC office in Switzerland. While in Paris CF met his first Russian Mennonite refugee (as opposed to Prussian), a Gerhard Neufeld who had fled there across western Europe with his wife and daughter and a fifteen-year-old sister of his. They stood in great fear of being repatriated by the Russians and being forcibly sent back to Russia. CF had heard of Neufeld's predicament by mail through his Canadian relatives, and had sent a brief note to him in France saying, 'Come to Paris, maybe I can help you.' Neufeld received the note just the day before CF arrived in Paris and was fortunately able to arrange to get there. They spent a day together with Neufeld pouring out his tale of woe. CF asked him many questions about conditions in Russia among the Mennonites, and then asked him also about his own personal relationship to God, and reminded him of his great responsibility before God in the training of his children. This became a turning point in his life, he says, and led directly to his conversion. CF could not help him immediately, but he let Peter Dyck know about him, and Peter was able to rescue him and his family out of his desperate situation and bring him through Luxembourg and Belgium to safety in Holland.

Next, the door opened to fly to Holland. It was a great joy to spend time together with Peter and Elfrieda. Their first contact with Russian Mennonite refugees happened when thirty-three of them appeared at the Dutch border asking for entry. The Dutch authorities tried to turn them back thinking they were Germans but they used their Low German dialect (Plattdeutsch) and insisted they were of Dutch descent. It was through a newspaper article that Peter and Elfrieda caught wind of them, and when they rushed down were delighted to discover that they really were Russian Mennonite refugees. Peter prevailed with the authorities and they finally agreed to allow in 1,000 on the basis of a quickly created 'Manno Pass' – if the American Mennonites would cover the cost of feeding them and the Dutch Mennonites would house them.

CF was eager to meet them and arrangements were made to go along with Dom Hylkema to Fredeshiem, the Mennonite centre where they were being housed. Jacob Giesbrecht was the his-

torian of the group and it was agreed that he would give them his account. He didn't get far however, before he choked up with tears coursing down his cheeks. Gerhard Neufeld, who was now amongst them, took over. Six hundred and fourteen of them left Nieder Chortitza in October 1943 heading in the direction of Warsaw, Poland. Before they reached Warsaw, 341 were caught by the Russians and forcibly returned, many never to be heard of again. After a brief stay in Warsaw they fled toward Dresden where they stayed the winter. Twenty-one died there. In early spring they trekked on to Yugoslavia, working for farmers, and then into Austria, where they lost another 150 people.

Finally they got into Bavaria and in a desperate state of exhaustion and near starvation reached a refugee camp, on May 10, 1945—two days after the War ended. They stayed there for two months, but felt they must press on to Holland. After leaving the refugee camp they were caught by the police in Rasstadt and put on a train heading for the East German border—but they escaped at one of the stops and hid in the fields. They were caught again, and threatened, but one of the mothers said "shoot us right now, if you will, but we will not go back to Russia!" Finally there was just one eighty-two year old grandmother who wasn't able to flee from the train, and she was taken across into East Germany never to be heard of again. As for the rest, their number was down to fifty-three. On the last lap there were stops at Ulm and in Mannheim. When they reached the Dutch border at Maastricht they were down to thirty-three. Six hundred and fourteen had started out in October 1943 and by summer 1945 their number had been decimated to thirty-three. CF was deeply moved by their story, and now more than ever wanting to get into Germany to begin his actual search.

## Into Germany

It was back in London that he finally did get permission to enter Germany, but first of all, only into the American zone. It was on October 9 that he flew into Frankfurt. Samuel Goering from the MCC office in Switzerland was there to meet him. His name caused some consternation among the US authorities, and

they had to be assured that he was not related to the infamous Herman Goering. In Basel the Swiss phone operators would not take his calls because of his name. CF noticed that Hannau, near Frankfurt, was totally destroyed by bombs and fire, and was reduced to a heap of rubble. Frankfurt also was in ruins. The grandiose 'Hauptbahnhof' (main train station), that CF had last seen in 1936 after the World Conference, was now just a ragged skeleton.

Before he could begin his search the American authorities checked him out carefully. "Who are you, and what is your assignment?"

"I am seeking my brethren...."

"Yes, yes, but they are from Russia and it is to Russia that they should return."

CF had to explain that, like himself, they had escaped from the land of their bondage, and would never return, whatever happened. Furthermore many of them had received German citizenship while they were settled briefly in German occupied Poland (the Warthegau).

"Well, if they are Germans, that might make it even worse, there will be no help forthcoming for them." Little did CF realize how much trouble their German naturalization would cause him in the years to come.

As soon as he was cleared CF inquired after Christian Hege, co-author of the Mennonite Lexicon and co-organizer with Christian Neff of the World Conferences. His home was just outside Frankfurt. Unfortunately he had not survived the war. Christian Neff, however, was still alive and living at the Weierhof near Worms, and CF was later able to visit him. At Karlsruhe he was able to meet his old friend Benjamin Unruh. It was only nine years ago that they met in Amsterdam but to Unruh it seemed like a whole lifetime of horror had transpired since then. Unruh lived next to the Thomashof, the south German Mennonite retreat centre, where CF also met his friend Christian Schnebele, the director. The dark cloud of Nazism had begun to lift but many of the people CF met were still in a state of shock.

By now he knew that in order to accomplish his mission he would have to criss-cross Germany in every direction, but how was this to be accomplished? He finally arranged to use the Dutch

MCC car, but it would have to be driven by an authorized person—which turned out to be a Quaker Red Cross worker. They passed from Holland through Gronau and Osnabruueck on their way to Vlotho where he received considerable help from Colonel Agnew of the British Red Cross Civilian Relief Commission.

The next morning they left for Hamburg but were delayed for two and a half hours when, passing through a small German village, they picked up a six inch spike in one of their tires. When they finally got to Hamburg he was overwhelmed by the destruction and the rubble strewn everywhere. They drove straight to the Mennonite church and met Pastor Otto Showalter's wife. Otto was still in South Germany serving as a chaplain with the German army. In Hamburg they had more car trouble. This time it was the lights, and they were told it might take four days before they could get the parts needed to repair it. Fortunately the Red Cross provided him with a truck and driver, and this is how he got to Celle where he had the name and address of a Mennonite refugee.

When he found the person, word spread rapidly that a Mennonite from America was there to help them. By late afternoon over thirty gathered together to hear what he had to say. They were excited to hear that the MCC had sent him to do whatever was necessary to help them and to reunite them with their families. Their main concern was, could they come to Canada, and how soon? Everything possible would be done, but he could not give them any assurance yet that Canada would open its doors for Russian Mennonite refugees.

One of the members of this group was Maria Foth, a twenty-seven-year-old girl whose mother and father died under the Communists, but who was able to escape with her grandmother. She had trained as a teacher in Russia and had lost her faith in the process. Through severe trials she had gone through recently, when Russian soldiers had tried to force her to return to Russia, she had recommitted her life to the Lord.

That very afternoon the fourteen-year-old nephew of the friend she was staying with, had received two free tickets to a small animal circus and she had gone with him. Just before the act was to begin there was an announcement on the public address system, "Is there a Miss Foth in the audience? Miss Maria Foth." Her first reaction was that the Russians had tracked her

down again, but then the word came, "a young boy outside wants to see you." She risked it and went out, where the seven-year-old nephew of her friend said, "Hurry, hurry, an American is here and wants to see you." She hurried to the place, and found out that the American was a Canadian, a Mr. C.F. Klassen, sent by the MCC. He said to the group, "Right now I am only collecting names and other personal data, to publish in our Mennonite papers at home. But we are also praying that God will open the doors across the Atlantic for you in His time. God is able to do it!" He proceeded to take down all the pertinent information, and finally turned to Maria and asked, "And you, haven't you any relatives in North America?"

"Oh yes," she said, "grandmother has a brother in California and other relatives in Canada, but I don't have a single address."

He wondered whether she remembered any of the names, and she mentioned a Cornelius Driediger. "I know him well," said CF, "he is, in fact, a good friend of mine." He wrote down the address by memory and handed it to her. She immediately jotted down a few lines for her uncle and CF said he would mail it for her.

From this group of refugees he got names and addresses of other refugees in different parts of Germany. When he got to Goettingen he received a great deal of help from Ernst and Rosa Crous. Crous was a Mennonite historian who had been a librarian in Berlin before the war. Both of the Crous' sons died in action in the war, and when the Russians advanced on Berlin they took as many documents and books with them as they could and fled westward. In Goettingen they were crammed into very small quarters and when CF found them, every square inch of their apartment was covered with papers and books. They were a great help to Cornelius because they had already collected the names and addresses of many of the refugees. Their place became known as the North German Mennonite research bureau, and as it turned out they coordinated all the names and addresses for the British Zone especially of the Danzig Mennonites. They were delightful hosts and made CF feel very welcome. Through all the grief and turmoil they had not lost their joy. He really looked the part of a scholar and historian with his very thick glasses and short unkempt hair.

The impact of what CF was experiencing can be seen in a letter he wrote from the Crous' to Peter and Elfrieda in Amsterdam,

You should see the tears of joy when I tell them about their relatives and friends in Canada. What these poor people have endured! Indescribable suffering and misery! Only very seldom is a whole family intact. In most families the father and sons are missing. In isolated cases there are fathers whose wives and children are missing. Some in this zone have been picked up by the Russians and sent back. They are shameless in their boldness. I haven't met one yet personally, but I was very close to the East German border today and it gave me a very uncomfortable, almost sinister feeling.

After three days in Goettingen he looked up a Rempel family not that far away. He arrived there late in the afternoon and knocked on their door. They were delighted to meet 'Klosse von Kanada.' They had heard via the refugee grapevine that there was someone making contacts with Mennonite refugees from Russia, and here he was in person. They immediately sent their children (one of which is Rev. Dick Rempel now in the Fraser Valley in British Columbia) to notify others in the vicinity about a meeting that night.

In the meanwhile they poured out their story of the enforced collectivization in 1929, the artificial famine in 1933 when seven million died, the end of church services in 1935, the dismantling of their church building to make sidewalks in 1937, the sudden disappearance of sixty-nine men out of their village in 1938, the arrival of the German army in 1941, and their flight beginning on October 20, 1943. They were part of what is called the 'first trek' westward, which for Mennonites alone involved over a thousand wagons. It involved mostly those from Chortitza. Molotschna villagers had been forcibly sent beyond the Urals before the Germans arrived. To begin with the journey went fairly well, but after a time the Russian forces drew closer and began to bomb the caravan. Many were killed or left wounded. Cows and sheep were left behind and many of the horses were killed. The carnage was terrible. Those that reached Poland were penniless and destitute. They were told to settle in the Polish corridor between Lodz and Posen. Unfortunately the Germans, who had occupied Poland al-

ready in 1939, simply removed the Polish farmers to make room for these refugees. Many of the Mennonite refugees resisted this plan, and they were proved right, for when the disgruntled Poles returned they treated the refugees cruelly.

During this time (1943-45) Elder Bruno Ewert from Danzig exercised a significant spiritual ministry among them, baptizing many of them. After eighteen months the Russians drew closer again and this led to the 'second flight' which was even more terrible than the first. Some headed south to the Sudeten mountains and on to Leipzig and into Austria; others crossed through Berlin into central Germany; still others went due west into northern Germany. The Rempel family took the central route over Goslar and Wernigerode, finally ending up near Mainz in West Germany. In the process father and mother were separated from one another for eight months. What agony they went through wondering whether the others had been picked up by the Russians and sent back. What joy and what a miracle it was in their eyes when the whole family was reunited in September 1945, not too long before CF found them.

About forty-five refugees crowded together in the Rempel quarters that evening. What a sense of expectation was in the air. CF began by reading a list of those he had already found scattered throughout Germany. What joy when one in the group would suddenly recognize the name of a close relative or friend and discover for the first time that they too had made it safely out of the house of bondage. Then they asked CF about relatives and friends in Canada and in most cases he was able to identify them and tell them where they lived and how they were doing—down to practical details that amazed them; details that had been the bread and butter of his *Reiseschuld* work!

Then he told them some things about Canada, the desired goal for most of them. To the oldest member of the gathering he said,

In Canada, brother Letkeman, you'll have to go to Sunday School. There, everybody goes, from the youngest to the oldest. There will be many other adjustments that you will have to make, but if you're humble you'll make it. You'll have to resist the temptation to complain and to insist that the way you did things in the

old country are the best.

At this point they were hoping to be in Canada in a few months and nothing he said daunted them. CF in return was deeply touched by their child-like faith, especially when Rempel prayed that the goodness of God to them, would lead them to true repentance. Sometimes it is in the lion's den that one becomes more aware of God's goodness. "How unsearchable are God's judgments, and His ways past finding out."

Another example of how the Lord directed CF in his search, is the letter he received from Brazil, from Johannes Janzen, the artist, a former neighbor of his back in Donskoj. He was concerned about his daughter Agatha, married to a Robert Janzen, who were hoping to get out of war-torn Germany to Brazil. CF was able to locate the little village she was in, and this is how she reports the incident: "The first time he came, my husband was not home. I heard a knock at the door, and didn't look in that direction immediately since I thought it was just someone from the house. Six families shared the little house at that time. Finally I turned around from where I was busily at work over the wood stove, and there stood a stranger. We looked at each other in silence for a moment, and then he asked, "Do you know me?"

Suddenly, it was like scales dropping from my eyes, and I said, "Yes, I know, you are Cornelius Klassen."

"Did you know that I was in Germany?"

"No," I said.

"You mean to say you recognized me from twenty-seven years ago in Donskoj?" He couldn't get over his amazement, for when she left New Samara, she was only eight years old, and he must have been in his early twenties. She knew all his younger brothers and sisters and was eager to hear of news about them. CF also had some pictures with him of his brothers and sisters and their children. In a moment of time, Russia, Brazil, and Canada, all came into focus in that refugee kitchen in an obscure village in war-torn western Europe.

Another group of refugees in Heringnohe, between Nuernberg and the Czech border in Bavaria, had written to Benjamin Unruh, who passed on their address to CF. When he and his English chauffeur arrived there on a Sunday morning no one

they asked seemed aware of a group of refugees from Russia. Finally they went to the American Army barracks, but still there was no clue. They drove back into the village. CF wasn't the kind of person to give up easily, and as he was standing there pondering about what to do next, he could hear the faint strains of a familiar hymn— "Weiss ich den Weg auch nicht, Du weisst ihn wohl; dass macht die Seele still und friedevoll" (Even when I don't know the way, You certainly do; and you quiet my soul and fill it with peace). "Those are my people," he said to the driver, "let's go."

A little flock of refugees was gathered in Victor Janzen's room, and because they were crammed in and the autumn weather was pleasant they had opened the windows. They didn't have a minister, but they liked to gather on Sunday mornings to sing a few hymns, to read some Scripture and pray together.

When CF knocked, one of the children sitting close to the door peeped out and said "There's a man here."

One of the men stepped out and came right back in saying excitedly, "There's a Klassen from Canada here!" They were dumbfounded. For almost twenty years they had as good as no news from friends in America, and now, suddenly, there was a live Mennonite there, straight from Canada, who even spoke Low German! The Communists had given them the impression that Mennonites in America were all in concentration camps.

No sooner had he made his way into the crowded room than they began to bombard him with questions: "have you heard of...., do you know...., is so and so still alive etc.?" To their amazement he was able to answer most of their questions. It seemed to them that he knew every Mennonite in Canada. Suddenly he asked them, "Is this all of you?"

"No, there are many more in the vicinity."

"I want to see them all," he said.

This wasn't so easily accomplished. As refugees they had no telephones and no cars. It was quickly agreed that Victor Janzen would go along with the chauffeur and make the rounds notifying them. There was excitement in the air. Suddenly these quiet and somewhat quaint refugees from Russia were the center of attention. An official had come all the way from Canada specially to see them and to help them.

The same scene was repeated on this Sunday afternoon and the questions went on into the evening. He answered many questions, but he felt bad that he couldn't promise them much. Neither Canada nor the United States were receiving any refugees yet, and the MCC had no concrete plans yet for any other country. Their longings for a new homeland couldn't be satisfied yet, but at least their hope was kindled afresh—they had been feeling all alone in a cruel world but now they had been 'found' and they knew that efforts would be made on their behalf.

CF's ten-day visa for Germany had been extended to fifty days, and once he had about 3,000 names of refugees he decided he could return to Canada and continue the work from there. Crous, Unruh and a whole network of leaders and pastors would continue the task of locating them and registering them, since MCC as yet had no access to Germany.

### **West Berlin**

But CF had one more desire in his heart, to visit Berlin. The first hurdle was to get official authorization through the military authorities. The next was to try to arrange for a flight. The Lord answered prayer and permission was finally granted. The first flight was turned back due to thick fog, but the second was successful. It was early November and very cold in Berlin and he seemed never to be able to really get warm. He finally found the Russian Mennonite refugees, one hundred and twelve in all, crowded into sixteen rooms in an old house on Victoria-Louise Platz. There was no central heating and a serious shortage of fuel. Each room was heated by a small wood stove. Twigs and branches were gathered daily in an effort to cook and keep themselves warm. It seemed to be a losing battle and the rooms were always filled with soot and smoke. Almost all the trees in the famous Zoological Garden had been chopped down and used for fuel. Their greatest anxiety however, they told CF, was their concern about how long the Americans would be able to resist the Russian pressure on Berlin. A plan to meet their most basic needs by Red Cross vans and ambulances traveling overland from Holland, would be worked out soon by Peter and Elfrieda Dyck. Their num-

bers increased during the fourteen months of the Dyck's stay, finally reaching 1,125 in all.

On returning from Berlin CF was finally able to drive back to Amsterdam and return the MCC vehicle to them. He had many stories to share with Peter and Elfrieda and their co-workers and the refugee community. He also thanked his sister warmly for the sleeping bag and hot water bottle she had urged him to take along when he first launched into Germany. They had come in much more handy than he would have ever guessed.

After two days a flight to Zuerich was arranged. He remarked that Swissair didn't serve meals on the flight, but he feasted on the spectacular view of the Black Forest and the Alps. What a beautiful world God placed man in, and yet what a sordid mess man is making of it! From Zurich he took a train to Basel, where Sam Goering met him and took him to a hotel. He was delighted to receive, through Sam, two letters from Mary with news from home. At one point he had gone over a month with no letter from Mary getting through. He and Sam discussed refugees and relief until late into the night. Next day they drove on to Geneva where they made contact with the International Red Cross and the World Council of Churches. In both cases they received much encouragement and promises of help in their efforts to assist the refugees.

Back in Basel Arlene Sittler, MCC secretary, was successful in arranging a flight by Swissair to London, and from there to Winnipeg by Trans Canada Airlines. This meant he would just make it home for Christmas! He says he could hardly sleep when he found out. What was planned as a six week exploratory visit, had turned into an almost four month working mission. As he lay there in his hotel room his heart was filled with praise to God for having opened so many doors and having put him in touch with so many of his refugee brothers and sisters. He thanked God too for sustaining his strength— his heart hadn't acted up and caused him any troubles or delays.

## Chapter 11

### PREPARING FOR EMIGRATION

*"I will make a way in the wilderness . . ." (Isaiah 43:19).*

On December 23, 1945 CF's brother Henry was at the airport to meet him and drive him to their home at 165 Cathedral Avenue in the North End of Winnipeg—it was the old three-storey house they bought in 1940 from Rev. Ernest Salter, a delightful Methodist minister who was director of the British and Foreign Bible Society in Winnipeg. It was Mary who insisted on the purchase and arranged it. She was convinced that if they kept on renting they would never get out of the bind they were in. The Lord rewarded her faith and it served the family and many of Cornelius' friends very well.

It was a joyous Christmas celebration with Mary and the children on the 24th in the evening, after the traditional Sunday School program in the church. On the 25th all his brothers and sisters and their families came over and were eager to hear about his experiences in Europe. The stark contrast between life in Canada and the tragedy he had witnessed in Europe, still lay heavy on his heart.

The next day Mary brought him up to date on all the secretarial work she had done for him in his absence. She had to carry all the responsibilities for the Mennonite Central Relief Committee, including all the banking. He laughed when she told him about the time she was getting on to a crowded streetcar and

her bag got caught in the automatic doors and the streetcar took off with about \$10,000 worth of cheques and money orders. She ran down the middle of Main Street after the streetcar and wouldn't stop gesticulating until the streetcar stopped. Cornelius realized once again what a faithful partner and co-worker he had in Mary.

### **Chicago MCC Meeting**

The following day he left for the MCC Executive Meetings in Chicago (December 28-29), where he reported on his findings in Europe and made recommendations on how to proceed. Some basic principles and procedures were agreed upon:

1) It was understood that any resettlement of refugees in Canada would be the responsibility of the Canadian Mennonite Board of Colonization. Resettlement in the United States and Paraguay, however, was the responsibility of the MCC.

2) That Canada was the preferred country for most refugees was generally conceded—this was particularly true for close relatives. Therefore every effort was to be made to facilitate immigration to this country. The United States, too, was preferred for some although the possibility of entry was more remote here than in Canada.

3) The executive secretary had been instructed to negotiate with the Paraguayan government relative to the immigration policy, especially as concerned Mennonite refugees. There was official confirmation from this government that the doors were open and that the country would receive Mennonites on the same basis as outlined under the liberal policies in 1921. It followed then that such as could not enter Canada or the United States would find this country the final land of refuge.

4) While the Canadian Board of Colonization assumed responsibility for resettlement in Canada it was mutually agreed that the contacting and administering agency in Europe for all refugee work would be the M.C.C.

5) Full cognizance was to be taken of the desires of the refugees themselves before they would be moved into any country. There was to be deviation from this directive only in case

an emergency forced action otherwise.

6) Any aid given while the displaced persons were still in Europe was to be considered an outright gift. Aid given after the refugees left Europe, such as transportation, equipment and resettlement costs, was to be considered as a loan. (Unruh 179-80)

This last point may sound as if some of the refugees could have come under a great financial burden, but as it turned out the MCC and the relatives of the refugees were very generous and there never was the kind of *Reiseschuld* problem that existed in the twenties and thirties.

P.C. Hiebert, Harold Bender, and Orie Miller were all in strong agreement with CF that everything possible must be done to help this new wave of emigrants from Russia. It will be remembered that P.C. Hiebert and Orie Miller served with MCC in Russia during the 1921-22 famine and knew first hand what these refugees had gone through.

### **Reporting to the Churches**

Cornelius was back in Winnipeg by Friday and on Sunday afternoon, December 30, he reported at the South End MB church to a large and attentive audience. For many of them it was close relatives and friends he was talking about, not some faceless mass of people. They were aware too that Mennonite history was in the making. That a chapter had closed for all the Danzig Mennonites was very apparent and, humanly speaking, there would be no return. For thousands of Russian Mennonites, too, a new chapter was opening up before them. The spiritual needs among the refugees and in the German Mennonite churches, CF told them, were far greater than he had ever imagined. Would the Mennonites of Canada rise to the occasion, was his challenge. One could sense in the gathering a strong and united affirmation. It was evident too in the generous collection that was taken up for the work of the MCC. T.O.F. Herzer, director of the Canadian Colonization Association and CF's boss in the *Reiseschuld* days, was also present. The fact that in his heart a spark of compassion was kindled toward refugees would become a blessing to

thousands in the years to come—as we will see.

After Winnipeg, he reported in four other locations in Manitoba: Steinbach, Altona, Arnaud, and Winkler. The collections in Manitoba totalled \$5,000. Then he traveled on to Saskatchewan where he reported at six locations six nights in a row: Swift Current, Herbert, Drake, Saskatoon, Rosthern, and Hepburn. In Alberta he visited only Coaldale, but in British Columbia he spoke in Yarrow, Sardis, Chilliwack, Abbotsford, and Vancouver. After a brief stop at home he covered Ontario speaking at Kitchener/Waterloo, Leamington, Vineland, Virgil, and Port Rowan. He often spoke for two hours uninterrupted, and held the people spell-bound. As he shared out of the overflow of his heart they not only caught a glimpse of the tragic effects of the unrestrained hatred that had been unleashed in Europe by the war, they also found the springs of mercy and compassion being opened up within them. A reverberation went through the ranks of the Mennonite brotherhood uniting them and preparing them for great expressions of generosity and service in the months and years to come.

After this whirlwind of reporting, CF flew to Montreal on February 19 to speak with CPR officials about their help for the next wave of Russian Mennonite refugees. He received a warm welcome from his old friend, H.P.C. Cresswell, the national director of the Canadian Colonization Association of the CPR. The credibility established through the faithful collecting in the difficult depression years, would now bear fruit. They promised to do whatever was within their means to be of help. His next stop was in Ottawa, where he contacted officials in the Department of External Affairs and the Department of Immigration. Unfortunately post-war Canadian immigration policy had not yet been clarified and parliament would not be meeting until March 14 1946. But he was able to register the concern of his people and their hope that Canada would continue to welcome genuine refugees—especially family members and close relatives. The United Nations meeting in London in January had made no decision about the refugee problem but they would be meeting again in New York in April and CF was hopeful they would take up the challenge then and provide the member nations with some positive guidelines.

The lists of refugees began appearing at this time in the Mennonite German language papers *Der Bote* and *Die Rundschau*. The February 6 edition of the *Rundschau*, for example, listed the names and place of birth of all those refugees at the Fredeshiem MCC center in Holland. Subsequently, there were also long lists of "Friends and Relatives being Sought." These newspapers played an important role in bringing family members and friends into contact with one another. They also published some of the rare letters from persecuted Mennonites in Siberia and other isolated parts of Russia.

The news coming through from Russia was grim. Cornelius and Mary received a letter from pastor Herman Riesen, who had officiated at their wedding twenty years ago. His home was Old Samara, but he was now writing from Omsk, Kasakstan. His three children had been conscripted into the armed forces and he hadn't seen them since. The Mennonite farmers from Old Samara and the Trakt had all been forcibly sent beyond the Urals. Those in New Samara and Orenburg had been allowed to stay but under strict collectivization. Riesen estimated that in 1946 there were approximately fifteen million slaves of the State in Russia, doing forced labor in forests and mines. They lived in very primitive conditions in barracks or sod huts, sleeping on straw mats, with soup and porridge and a little dried fish as their staples, and usually working twelve hours per day.

About five million were forcibly returned to Russia from Europe, as had been agreed by Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin at Yalta. This outraged CF. What a blatant disregard for human rights! The Allies felt bad about it too, and tried to cover it up as much as possible. It wasn't fully documented until thirty years later and it is now considered that the betrayal of these displaced persons and emigres was perhaps the most heinous episode of the last great war. Stalin had already decided in 1942 that "a Russian prisoner captured alive, is ipso facto a traitor." When he heard that his own son Jacob had been captured, he said "I have no son Jacob." When Jacob heard of this in the German prisoner of war camp, he committed suicide by throwing himself onto electrified barbed wire. (Macleans 11 February 85 24)

It is estimated that of the 35,000 Russian Mennonites that fled westward, about 22,000 were forcibly sent back to Russia,

most of them ending up in Siberia. One Mennonite mother writing to her children in Dalmeny, Saskatchewan told how she had reached Poland, then finally East Germany, but was caught there by the Russians and sent to Siberia, where she was now working on roads and in mines under unbearable conditions. She had not heard from her children for years. H.H. Janzen, MB leader in Kitchener Ontario, told CF about the son of a Mennonite minister in Russia, who after two years in prison and repeated interrogations lost his sanity and threw himself in front of an oncoming train. Another Mennonite brother sank into utter despair and hung himself in a barn— even as his brother had done four years earlier. The cry of CF's heart was, "Oh God, have mercy, and become again our very present help in this time of trouble!"

Meanwhile in Europe the MCC was getting deeply involved in feeding programs and clothing distribution among refugees and others in need. What they had done in England, and were now doing in Holland and France, they were able to begin doing in Germany in March 1946— and as always they ministered impartially to Mennonite and non-Mennonite alike.

By June, CF was able to inform his concerned brothers in Canada that MCC had joined the Council of Relief Agencies Licensed for Operation in Germany (CRALOG), and that Peter and Elfrieda Dyck would be returning to Europe in July 1946 to head up the work in Berlin. From July it was possible to send CARE packages to Germany and in the ensuing months thousands were sent by Mennonites in Canada and were a great help to the struggling refugees. And by September he could say that 10,000 Russian Mennonite refugees had been registered by the network reaching out all over West Germany, and that it would cost the MCC at least one million dollars he estimated, in order to help them to emigrate to new homelands.

On Sunday afternoon, October 20, 1946, a farewell service for CF took place at the North End MB Church. Most of the Mennonite churches in Winnipeg were represented there, as well as many from rural Manitoba. Brother Abram H. Unruh spoke at the occasion taking as his text the words of Joseph in Genesis 37:16 "I seek my brethren." Part of CF's second mission to Europe would be to help to send off about 2,000 refugees to Paraguay. No refugee would be pressured to go to Paraguay, but it was al-

ready becoming clear that for many this would be the only hope—if they were wanting to escape the continent soon and make a new start.

Later that evening CF was busy doing his last minute packing. It always made Mary nervous to see how late he left it. The last hour always seemed so hectic, and it often wasn't certain whether he would really make it to the airport on time or not. This time he was leaving from their new home at 951 Henderson Highway in East Kildonan. Mary had arranged the sale of their first home in the North End during the summer and had located this two storey white frame house situated on a half acre near the end of the East Kildonan streetcar line. It would be their last home in Winnipeg.

From London CF, now on his second mission (21 October 46—17 March 47), wrote the first of many reports that were published in the Mennonite newspapers:

What a pleasant surprise it was to see so many friends at the North End church on Sunday afternoon to wish me farewell. What a blessing for my family and myself. The Lord is so good. The words of encouragement extended to me by brother Abram Unruh, and a number of other brethren, are accompanying me on my journey. There were also a few warm handshakes at the airport at 2:00 a.m.! After a brief stopover in Toronto we arrived in Montreal where my brother John met me and took me to his home. Next morning I had an opportunity to contact the CPR about immigration matters, after which John took me to the Dorval airport from where we left at 11:40 a.m. The sun was shining and the conditions for flying were ideal. It took our Lancaster seventeen and a half hours flying time to reach London—that's about 258 miles per hour.

I am writing this letter from the same room I was in on my last day in Europe on my first mission. MCC has turned its building at 68 Shepherds Hill, Highgate, over to the YMCA, but has reserved three rooms for MCC travelers and missionaries. I just met brother Harold Sherk and brother A.E. Kreider. Sherk was returning from India where he has been MCC director for two years, and Kreider was on his way to India to take over from him.

H.P.C. Cresswell, director of the Canadian Colonization Association, arrives in London tomorrow and I am looking forward to meeting with him.

My work right now involves acquiring the necessary visas to get into Germany. They are not easy to obtain. I know my work to

be in God's hands, and I know He is also watching over the destiny of our many dear refugees. He has ways and means of reaching through with His help. If He wants to use us and some of the means He has entrusted to us, to extend a saving hand to them, then it is a great responsibility for us Canadian and American Mennonites, and also a great honor. May God help us to be worthy of the task, so that He can entrust us with further work. (MR 6 November 46 4)

On October 31, 1946 the MCC executive began to plan for a transport of about 2,000 refugees to South America. It was agreed that if possible Peter and Elfrieda Dyck should accompany them, and that C.A. DeFehr should be on hand in South America making arrangements to receive them. The projected cost was \$400,000 and word came that the United States Mennonites were pitching in vigorously. At the same time the MCC was exploring settlement possibilities in Mexico, Brazil and Argentina.

### Berlin Again

On November 14 CF flew from London to Amsterdam and began negotiating with the Holland-America line for use of the 'Volendam' in mid January. From here he flew on to Berlin and was able to join the Mennonite refugee community in their Thanksgiving Day celebration, November 21. This is how one of the nurses, Aganete Neugebauer, described the occasion. Her father, David Klassen, Nikopol, Russia, was taken by the Communists in 1921 and was never heard of again; and her husband, Dr. Otto Neugebauer, was taken in 1938. Neither of them had been heard of and she was assuming they had both been killed. She reported:

Today we are celebrating Thanksgiving and it has been a glorious day, a real blessing to us all. And best of all we had the joyous surprise of having brother CF Klassen amongst us. I doubt if any of our hearts were ever gripped and touched before as they were today. Pastor Epp expressed it well when he said that our heart strings have been vibrating wildly. Yes, our hearts are filled to overflowing with thanks and many a tear has been shed. Although many a heart is heavy with sorrow because of missing loved ones, today they were tears of joy. What tears of joy are, everyone knows from his own experience. Not everyone can express their deep gratitude audibly by clothing it in beautiful words, but in the

stillness deep gratitude is ascending.

We all know what has transpired and why we are so thankful. Brother Klassen visited us a year ago at our quarters on Victoria-Louise Platz and remembers the grim scene and the bleak memories with which he left us. Being here today will convince brother Klassen of the great changes that have taken place and why we have so much to be thankful for. Then he saw us like grey figures in smoke filled rooms of a dilapidated building, hungry and cold. But today? Just look at us today! All housed in lovely rooms; all nicely dressed—especially today, and well nourished. And that's not all. For those among us who are sick, we have our own hospital wing for twenty patients, who are well looked after by doctors and nurses. And just today, to climax our celebrations, we received our own telephone in the hospital.

As for me, I could just cry and shout all day, for sheer joy and gratitude. One just can't describe adequately what is welling up within. And what festive decorations adorn our dining hall. Our meeting room too, that can accommodate us all (except for the children), was also a sight to behold. And your gifts to us of flour, bread, canned fruit, powdered milk, raisins, sugar and much more, were there amongst the greenery shouting out in love 'Sent in the Name of Christ.' And on the walls letters were displayed assuring us of your concern and your love and your prayers. We are experiencing good times. By my way of reckoning, too good—far beyond what we deserve. We thank you from the bottom of our hearts. But above all we should thank God. Our speakers made that very real to us today. And our actions ought to demonstrate our thankfulness.

We come from a country where everything that is Christian is outlawed, where everyone is spying on his neighbor, and where someone like myself hasn't heard anything about God for twenty years. And the conditions were tough, with no time for anything other than the struggle for one's daily bread. But worst of all, was the cruel separation from our loved ones. With trembling hearts the question keeps arising, why? Why is God punishing and testing us so severely? God alone knows, and God is good, so we will face the future with hope—for us too, a better day will dawn.

Amongst us already, all kinds of preparations are being made for Christmas. I too am looking forward to Christmas like a little child. Don't you imagine too that celebrating Christmas in such a large family must be delightful. Everybody is busy with something. The youth group is doing craft work, the school children are learning their parts and practicing, others are sewing and knitting. Everybody is doing something to contribute to the common joy. If you saw the materials being used in making presents you would marvel and you might not be able to hide a smile. Often it is just sugar or flour sacks or other odds and ends, but with a little effort

and imagination beautiful things are being created—even as God is creating beautiful things out of our lives as we let Him. (MR 15 January 47 1)

By mid-December CF was in Frankfurt making arrangements with the American military for the use of a two room apartment at Schlosserstrasse 3 to be used as his headquarters while in Europe. It was in an older residential district quite close to the American military offices in the large I.G. Farben office complex. CF was able to use the military post office and could eat in the officers' dining hall and make purchases in their PX stores. When the MCC later rented a building at 44 Vogtstrasse, CF chose to keep his own little apartment and do his own secretarial work. This wasn't always understood by the other MCC personnel, but they accepted it because he had a senior role in the refugee work and also a unique relationship to the German Mennonites who accepted him as one of their own and looked upon him somewhat differently than other MCC personnel.

CF sent home Christmas greetings from here:

From a battered, cold and starving Germany I send greetings to our congregations in Canada and the US. May our almighty God the Prince of Peace find a new homeland in 1947 for our sorely-tested refugees, and then also provide the means to get them there. May He bless all the organizations that are trying to help the many millions who have been torn from their homes and have lost everything. May the Lord equip everyone He is drawing into this great ministry with perseverance and faithfulness for every task whether great or small. (MR 2 January 47 1)

## Chapter 12

### THE VOLENDAM STORY

*"Let my people go . . . " (Exodus 9:1).*

By the end of 1946 it was estimated that there were about 12,000 Russian born Mennonite refugees in Europe. It was agreed that January 1947 was the time to begin moving the first large shipload out of the war zone to a new land, and that Paraguay would be the destination since the doors to Canada and the United States were not yet open. There was a sense of urgency both because of the tense post-war situation, as yet unresolved between the Allies who had partitioned Europe, and the very real fear of the Russian refugees that they might yet be forcibly repatriated. These refugees were in three locations, Holland, Munich and Berlin.

After CF was assured that everything possible had been done to get visas for the refugees he concluded the agreement in the Hague for the use of the 'Volendam' for the end of January. He says he often trembled at the thought that this undertaking would be costing the congregations in the United States and Canada close to half a million dollars. What if something shouldn't work out as planned? The leasing of the ship couldn't be postponed until all the refugees were together in Bremerhaven. He would have to move forward in faith. Once again the situation in Munich and Berlin was studied carefully together with Peter Dyck, and when they were assured that everything at the American military headquarters in Frankfurt was in order, the dates in the Hague were fixed: January 28 the 'Volendam' would leave Rotterdam

with the Dutch group, and January 31 it would leave Bremerhaven together with the Munich-Berlin groups.

The refugees in all three locations had been properly processed— inoculated and screened and all the necessary documents obtained. In the meantime Klassen had to fly to London to resolve some outstanding problems there. But when he returned to Amsterdam on January 25 he had a phone call from Peter Dyck in Berlin saying that new complications had arisen.

It was not to be an easy matter to unite the three groups at Bremerhaven. Although travel from Holland and Munich for two of the groups was a fairly straightforward matter, bringing the third group from Berlin was a far greater challenge. What a shock when Peter Dyck conveyed the grim message; the Berlin group were not allowed to come.

The essence of the problem was the fact that though the group was being moved from the United States sector of West Berlin, their journey to Bremerhaven would take them one hundred miles across the Russian sector of Germany (now East Germany). As Russian refugees this trip would need the full permission and protection of the Russian occupying forces. This was totally contrary to their usual procedure which was to return fleeing Russian subjects back to the homeland. How could they treat this group differently? And what if an incident should break out between the United States military escort and the occupying Russian forces? Would MCC expect the train to be defended by force?

Struggling with this new obstacle CF wondered if the whole plan was doomed to failure. Like the Israelites the helpless Berlin group saw their escape at hand yet needed a miracle (*Wunder*) to force the governing power to release them. CF continues:

What a blow that was! Had we in the last analysis missed God at some point, and gone our own way? We know how important it is in our work to be led by the Spirit of God. That is why we keep praying. What should we do now? Should we cancel the whole venture? How could we do that without ruining MCC's reputation? Could we do this to the 1,100 refugees in Munich and the 330 in Holland? How disappointed they would be. How could we be trusted in making future contracts for ship space if we backed out now? This whole matter of leasing ships was fraught with problems of all kinds. I had repeatedly assured skeptical officials who had many doubts and misgivings about our plan, that many were praying for the success of this venture, and that I personally have faith

that God is in it. Would we be put to shame?

Brother Dyck in Berlin attempted everything humanly possible to find a way. But it was in vain. Should we send the ship with half a load? I knew from previous experience that the possibility of quickly processing a new group of refugees in the British zone was out of question. Despite this I drove to the British headquarters and made an attempt. But my efforts were in vain. So I arrived back in Bremerhaven on the evening of the 29, heavy-hearted. The Volendam had arrived from Rotterdam at five in the afternoon with 329 refugees, accompanied by Marie Brunk, Magdalene Friesen and Evangeline Matthies, three of our Dutch MCC workers. The 1,070 from Munich had also arrived and were to begin boarding during the night.

The next morning, Thursday, January 30, Peter Dyck, who was now with us, called Berlin twice, but there was no change. Orie Miller in Akron had been informed and he was making every effort in Washington. A prayer alert was sent back to friends in Canada. Every avenue seemed closed and the situation hopeless. About noon the Captain asked me if he should weigh anchor at 3:00 that afternoon. I said yes; but had no inner peace about it, and went back a little later and told him to postpone the departure a day. In the afternoon we assembled all the refugees on deck and had a farewell service. The anxiety about the Berliners damped the spirits of those who were safe on board—many tears were shed. We poured it all out before the Lord in prayer. Without wanting to tell Him what to do, we asked that during the next twenty four hours, He influence the decision in Berlin.

Quietly and with faith in the God who can do all things the gathered company awaited the miracle they all knew would be necessary to bring their brethren out of Berlin across the red sea of the Russian zone, to the port of Bremerhaven.

## Miracle in Berlin

Our service wasn't quite over when I was called to see the Captain and Peter Dyck was called to the dock to answer a call from Berlin. With the Captain was the American Vice-Consul of Bremerhaven, who had hurried over with the good news that the Big-Four Commission was meeting in Berlin and that a ray of hope still existed. Then, suddenly, the message came through from Berlin that the group had received permission to leave! We immediately notified the refugees on board the ship through the loud-speaking system. What a shout of joy went up! Many eyes were moist—yes, 'Gott kann!'—the 'Wunder' (miracle) had been granted.

Now Siegfried Janzen and Peter Dyck with his brother Cornelius had to rush to Berlin to try to help with the loading and the return trip by train. In Berlin Elfrieda Dyck was given a bare two hours to prepare the thousand refugees for boarding the train. Fortunately she received the message during supper and was able to instruct them immediately as to how to proceed. Despite the fact that there were no lights due to a power shortage, everyone was packed and ready to proceed by 8:00 o'clock. Only the sound of the army trucks and the voices of those directing traffic broke the stillness, as 1,000 harassed and homeless Mennonites 'prepared to leave Egypt,' the reluctant permission from 'Pharaoh' having been granted.

In the dark at the train station were officers of every rank to witness the secretive escape. The previous day an announcer on public radio in Berlin had said, "A Dutch ship with Mennonites on board, has arrived in Bremerhaven, and is expecting to take on more Mennonites. No one knows where they are coming from, nor where they are going. There is something very mysterious about the whole operation." At the station a train made up of forty-one freight cars was ready to receive them. Blankets, ovens, and some straw had been procured—unfortunately most of the ovens were useless, producing more smoke than heat. Peter Dyck arrived at 2:00 am. just before the train departed, and was at least able to escort the transport to Bremerhaven. The trip through the Russian zone was slow and filled with anxiety. There being only one track, hours were spent waiting on sidings. Even the armed American guards with them were nervous. It was an unforgettable journey.

CF picks up the story:

The train from Berlin arrived at 2:00 in the morning on Saturday, February 1. A Margarete Paetkau, 45, had died of a heart attack during the journey. And during the bitter cold morning, the thirteen month old son of the Franz Neufelds, died of pneumonia. It wasn't until 9:00 in the morning that we were able to begin boarding the ship. Our refugees were half frozen and covered with dust from the twenty-four hour journey in box cars, but no grumbling or complaining could be heard. They made a fine impression. While we were transferring them, one car load at a time, onto the ship where they were given a hot cup of coffee and then registered and assigned sleeping quarters, an American officer approached me and said, 'Why don't you take these people to North America? They

are fine looking people that America could be proud of. Appeal directly to the president, there must be a way.' This was hardly the time to entertain new proposals.

As I watched our dear refugees ascending the gangway one after the other, my mind flashed back a few decades to the flourishing communities and strong churches in southern Russia. And now, that was all gone— and thousands of sons, husbands, fathers, and grandfathers had been exiled by the Bolsheviks into the Siberian north and beyond the Urals. Their whereabouts in many cases were unknown, and many of them were certainly dead by now. When the Communist dictatorship confronted the unyielding spiritual strength of the Mennonite family, its only option was to destroy them. A few were able to save themselves by fleeing, and amongst them were these passengers now boarding the Volendam. In talking with them personally, each one still had a word of thanks for help received in the last years. If one inquires about a husband or father or son, tears well over and they ask with trembling lips, "Will we ever be reunited again in this life? Should we be traveling even farther away?" God is the only one that can answer their questions and fulfill the longings of their hearts— the deepest desire they have for this life. In many cases we know that this reunion will not transpire until they reach their heavenly home. Many of the men they long for have already been tortured to death. In such circumstances God alone can bring comfort and strength. (MR 19 February 47 1)

CF was greatly encouraged by the fact that Peter and Elfrieda would be accompanying the refugees to South America. They had done excellent work in England and Holland and now more recently in Berlin. Together they made up a very powerful team. He would have liked to meet together with them and all the refugees for some final words of farewell, but time had run out. He asked Peter to pass on his farewell greetings in the words of the prophet Isaiah:

"For a brief moment I forsook you,  
but with great compassion I will gather you.  
In overflowing wrath for a moment I hid my face from you,  
but with everlasting love I will have compassion on you,  
says the Lord your redeemer.  
For the mountains may depart and the hills be removed,  
but my steadfast love shall not depart from you,  
and my covenant of peace shall not be removed,  
says the Lord, who has compassion on you.  
For you shall go out in joy.

and be led forth in peace;  
the mountains and the hills before you  
shall break forth into singing,  
and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands."

(Isaiah 54:7,8,10; 55:12)

As they stood there in the cold wind and watched the ship pull away and gradually disappear on the horizon, there was a prayer on CF's heart, "May God go with you, dear ones, and bring you safely to your destination. May He help you to quickly find your way into the congregations there. May He help you, too, to adjust to the strange conditions. By the time you arrive, you will no longer be refugees. God bless you." (MR 11 February 47 1)

Their leaving had its moments of high drama. One woman from the Munich party who had been separated from her husband for sixteen years, discovered to her amazement and joy that he was in the Berlin party. What a reunion on board ship! One young man who had come with the Munich group and whose wife and child were in the Berlin group, left the ship in despair when he heard they couldn't come, in order to try to make his own way to Berlin. Now his wife and child had arrived with the Berliners, and there was no way that he could be reached. What should be done? The wife and child left with the Volendam, and he would have to follow later. There were also mothers in the group, whose children came to the ship to see them, but they didn't yet have permission to leave. The partings were very painful.

An interesting report appeared in the New York Times shortly after the exodus under the title, "*Soviet Permission to Leave is Obtained by Gen. McNarney After Threat of Shooting.*"

With 2,100 Mennonite refugees from the Soviet Union nearing Paraguay, United States officials disclosed today a dispute that had preceded their departure from Germany. According to the US officials, Marshal Sokolovsky had insisted that the Mennonites were Soviet citizens who should have been repatriated under the Yalta Agreement. They added that Russian authorities had said they would resist to a point of shooting, any attempt to move 1000 Mennonites from the American sector of Berlin through the Soviet sector to Bremerhaven. Only a last minute personal intervention by General McNarney persuaded the Marshal to withdraw the threat. United States officials had supported the claim of about 10,000 Mennonites who had fled from Russia to Germany that they

were as much entitled to protection as the Jews who had fled from Poland. General McNarney made it clear for the first time that a Soviet citizen could admit his citizenship and still legally remain in the American zone of Germany (MR February 26, 47 1).

A report exists, (Frank Epp, ME 378), that the 'personal intervention' referred to, was a party in honor of Sokolovsky, the Russian General, thrown by Lieutenant Colonel William Stinson and General Clay, at which the signature was obtained from the Russian while he was 'under the influence.' God's ways are often strange, but the fact of the 'miracle' stands; that night over 1,000 escaped to 'freedom' in a new land.

Those staying behind were immediately faced with new problems. One hundred and fifteen of the refugees who had come from Berlin had decided not to go to Paraguay and were now waiting in four train cars. Accommodation would have to be found for them, and that was no easy matter in over-crowded West Germany. A refugee camp should be opened up in the British Zone to care for them and to process further arrivals. 'Today these plans are still shrouded in darkness,' said CF. 'We have discovered in our work that we have to pray and believe our way through from one stage to the next. God has helped us wonderfully thus far and He will continue to do so. He is able.' (MR 11 February 47 1)

### **An Unusual Funeral**

Another matter that needed immediate attention was a funeral for the two from Berlin who had died. He had asked the Captain of the ship to take the bodies on board and allow for a sea burial to be conducted the next day. The Captain had agreed, but the military authorities in charge of the dock would not permit it. So the bodies were taken by ambulance to the hospital in Lehe, a suburb of Bremerhaven. And that is where CF headed all alone the next morning, Sunday February 2. It is a touching sequel to the Volendam story, and reflects a side of CF's personality—his deep sense of commitment, and compassion for the personal details of each life involved in this entire venture. Although his heart was full of gratitude for the accomplishments of those turbulent days, and his body undoubtedly weary from the

strain, he still took time for the poignant little ceremony that took place that cold and bleak Sunday morning.

He made his way to the hospital, and there was taken by an orderly to the unheated chapel where the two coffins had been placed. With coat and gloves on, and attended only by the strange orderly, CF read Psalm 46 out loud:

"God is our refuge and strength,  
a very present help in trouble.  
Therefore we will not fear  
though the earth should change,  
though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea;  
though its waters roar and foam,  
though the mountains tremble with its tumult.  
There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,  
the holy habitation of the Most High.  
God is in the midst of her, she shall not be moved,  
God will help her right early.  
The nations rage, the kingdoms totter;  
He utters His voice, the earth melts.  
The Lord of hosts is with us;  
the God of Jacob is our refuge.  
Be still and know that I am God."

He then thanked God for His wonderful help in the last few days, and thanked Him too for these two pilgrims, who on their way to a new earthly homeland, had entered their eternal home. He also asked the Lord to comfort the eighty-three year old mother of the departed, and her two sisters Katherina and Maria, and the Franz Neufelds from Kronstal in Russia, the parents of the little boy. The two deceased were buried the next day by the local funeral authorities with the expenses being met by the German money the refugees had left behind—currency that would have no value as soon as they had left Germany.

CF wrote his account of the Volendam Story and this 'Unusual Funeral' from his bed in an isolation ward in a London hospital. He had come to London to negotiate with the IGCR about financial assistance for the transport to Paraguay, but had come down with a bad case of erisipolas (*Gesichtsrose*) and had to spend a week in hospital recovering. The financial assistance hinged on

whether these refugees were of Dutch descent or German descent. If they were of Dutch descent their transportation would be subsidized; if they were of German descent, there would be no subsidy. The first few days CF was too sick to do anything, but then he wrote: "I've been studying Mark's gospel in the hospital and must confess that together with the dramatic events of the last few weeks, the Lord has become more precious to me than ever. I'm thankful too for every opportunity to bear humble witness for my Lord, whether it be to my fellow patients or the so-called 'big officials.'"

While CF was flat on his back, two officials were sent to Holland to investigate the matter. Nothing conclusive could be turned up for a number of days, but when Dom Hylkema produced Dr. Horst Penner's dissertation on the Dutch background of the Mennonite settlers in Prussia, they had the documentation they needed, and were able to return with a positive report. As it turned out this saved the MCC about \$160,000—further evidence to CF that God's hand of blessing rested on these efforts to help homeless helpless pilgrims. How true it is that "God's strength is made perfect in our weakness."

While in hospital CF also wrote the following "Necessary Clarification,"

1) The first large group of Mennonite refugees is on its way to Paraguay. Among the 2300 there are not a few who would rather have gone to Canada. I must confess personally that I would have much rather directed the ship to Canada. After all, many of them have relatives in Canada all ready to welcome them in and take care of them. And I believe that Canada would have gained many new dependable citizens.

Many of their relatives in Canada are going to be displeased, when they read the list of passengers and find their relatives among them—people for whom they had made all kinds of costly preparations, but now heading for Paraguay. I myself was quite surprised at some who just couldn't face waiting for the door to Canada to open. On the other hand I can understand their desire to take the first opportunity that presents itself to escape the terrible situation in Europe. Many of them, who had already endured so much, wouldn't take the risk of an indefinite wait, and headed for the first open door. Who could blame them?

We are thankful to Paraguay for receiving our people, we also believe that our dear refugees will be warmly received into the con-

gregations there, and that economically they will soon find their feet. We also believe that many of their relatives in Canada will quickly overcome their disappointment and then stretch out a helping hand to assist them in paying for the trip and in getting established in their new environment. It is the Lord who does the leading. The MCC is just a helping hand—a very willing helping hand at that. I'm sure that the MCC representatives in Paraguay, brother C.A. DeFehr and brother Gerhard Warkentin and the others, will do everything in their power to make the reception and the new adjustments a success. The God who helped so wonderfully at this end—and is being gracious on the sea voyage according to Peter Dyck's cable—will certainly also help them on their arrival in South America.

2) We are also very thankful that our faith regarding Canadian Immigration laws has not been put to shame. The Law of May 28, 1946, that opened the doors for close relatives was very restrictive to begin with, but it has now been broadened. This happened on January 30 of this year. I only found out about it on the day that I entered hospital in London. I have studied the new law carefully and find to my great delight that under its provisions most of our refugees will be able to come to Canada, if their relatives and the wider constituency are prepared to make some sacrifices. God will grant us grace at this end as well to get the necessary travel permits and to find sufficient ship space. Our heavenly Father is bounteous.

As soon as the application of the relative has been processed and approved, the name of the refugee will be forwarded to the respective authorities in Europe who will begin the processing at this end. If he clears the medical and political screening he will be granted an entrance visa to Canada.

In our work here we've come across one problem that hadn't occurred to us. Even if a person decides on Canada and is then approved by the Canadian authorities, he still has to obtain an Exit Permit from the Zone in which he resides. This permit is not easy to get, especially for a person who lived in Russia until September 1939. We are at work in the British Zone and in London to have this altered, and with God's help we believe we will be successful. The transportation crisis will also gradually change, and the momentous day will come when the first refugee will enter Canada. We must be patient. The time is drawing near. May God bless the efforts being made at both sides of the ocean, so that the emigration can begin this summer. (MR 26 February 47)

Once out of hospital CF spent the next weeks negotiating with the military authorities about opening a refugee camp in Gronau, where Mennonite refugees could be housed and cared for and processed. Although he would have to leave Europe on

March 17, the doors to the Camp at Gronau wouldn't actually be opened until March 25. It was Siegfried and Margaret Janzen, MCC workers from Canada, who played a crucial role in the organization and running of the Camp.

Before leaving he wrote a warm letter of encouragement and exhortation to the congregations back home, posing the question, Where Do We Go From Here?

Our work here is made possible because back home in our congregations prayers are being offered up for us all and for the work, and because great generosity is being demonstrated. These are the great wells from which we, out in the field draw strength and fresh courage daily. This is true also for the refugees who are receiving the help. Remember that the blessings of the work reach far beyond the physical help given. For many a refugee God has again become a power to be reckoned with in his life. Many are experiencing Christ as their personal Saviour and Lord and their lives are gaining new meaning and purpose—even in the midst of the misery here in Germany. One young mother, that I met on my first mission just after she and her young child narrowly escaped death crossing over from the Russian Zone, approached me recently after a meeting I was addressing in Westphalia, and shared radiantly how she had found peace with God and was now finding the long wait to get to Canada no longer so tedious.

And how about back home? Many of you are experiencing daily that it truly is more blessed to give than to receive. It should also be clear by now that we are only at the beginning of our greatest responsibilities and our greatest expenses. Greater efforts will be demanded of us. The transport to Paraguay has swallowed up MCC's total reserves.. It is still meeting its commitments in the other countries where it is involved, but right now it recognizes that its biggest challenge is helping our own destitute brethren find new homes. There are still about 8,000 men, women and children from our brotherhood waiting anxiously for their opportunity to leave Europe.

That will cost a lot of money. The danger exists that we will think that now that the 2,300 are safely on their way, we can let up in our giving. In our relief work, as in other Christian endeavours, the crucial thing is perseverance. When the Volendam pulled away with 2303 rescued refugees, it wasn't our sweat and brains, but your prayers and gifts, that made it possible—prayers that God honored and gifts that He blessed. In light of this, doesn't our Relief Work take on new relevance for you, dear brothers and sisters?

As we look ahead we dare not let up. In faith we must continue to pray and give and work, regardless of the outcome. We as

Christians are in the enviable position of being able to do our part, while leaving the consequences completely in God's hands. I would like to thank the congregations in Western Canada in particular for all the gifts that have flowed into the MCC through our Mennonite Central Relief Committee. Please continue to make your contribution to this great work so that the account can be replenished for the great tasks ahead. (MR 19 March 47 1)

He also added a more personal note:

What a comforting thought, in the midst of the bleak and depressing surroundings in Germany, to be assured that back in Canada is a home, with a wife and children who are, humanly speaking, reasonably secure, and from whom I can hear regularly. How privileged we are over millions in Europe who have lost everything and also been separated from their families and friends through the terrors of the War and the Communist dictatorship in the East. May God bless our homes in North America and help us not to shy away from any sacrifice in helping them find a place of peace and rest.

The grace of God has been evident during all the traveling and in the many negotiations. There is so much yet that needs to be done. If the Lord continues to grant health and strength, then my stay at home will just be brief.

Greetings from all my fellow workers, from the refugees, and from myself—and thank you above all for your faithful intercession. We are laborers together, with God. (MR 19 March 47 1)

## Refugees Begin Arriving in Canada

Back at home in Canada, CF went through another round of reporting in the churches, beginning again with a crowded meeting at the South End MB Church in Winnipeg on Sunday afternoon March 30. The brothers and sisters were thrilled to hear first-hand about the miraculous Berlin exodus and other details of the work. From Winnipeg he moved on to Rosthern, Saskatoon and Hague, then to Steinbach and Altona, back again to Herbert, and then on to Coaldale, Vancouver and Abbotsford. After a few days home in Winnipeg, he flew to Washington, DC, where together with William Snyder they approached External Affairs about permission for refugees to enter the United States. Then he reported in Kalona, Iowa, and at Goshen College in Indiana, before moving up to Leamington, Vineland, and Kitchener, in On-

tario.

To CF's great delight the first five Russian Mennonite refugees to come to Canada after World War II, arrived at the CPR station in Winnipeg on April 13, 1947. They had come on the Cunard liner the Aquitania along with forty-seven other refugees. CF was at the station with other brothers and sisters from the Winnipeg and North Kildonan churches. The first one to arrive was the seventy-four-year-old Heinrich Klassen and his daughter Maria. A second daughter with four children was still waiting in Germany. They were on their way to his son Julius Klassen in Glenbush, Saskatchewan. The other three arrived on the next train, a Jacob Quapp, twenty-five, with his two sisters Tina and Maria. They were on their way to their brother David Quapp in Yarrow, British Columbia. They had come from Rosenort in the Molotschna. What a joy it was for CF to meet the first ones personally. It was a small beginning, compared to the 2,303 to Paraguay, but it was a start and a great encouragement—for runners of the thousands that were to follow.

Very soon his seven weeks on this side of the Atlantic had passed by, and his flight back to begin his third mission in Europe, was scheduled for May 13. Just before leaving he sent this request to the home congregations:

Dear brothers and sisters in North America, please pray that God in His sovereignty will remove hindrances and open doors so that thousands will be able to proceed to their destinations. All that we have of material possessions is ours from God, so let's pray that God will enable us not only to give willingly, but even to sacrifice. And please intercede on behalf of our dear refugees who sailed on the Volendam. First they were delayed in Buenos Aires, and now they are being prevented from entering Paraguay because of political unrest there. The MCC workers there, especially brother De-Fehr, brother Warkentin, and the Dycks, urgently need your prayers in trying to deal with the many problems. May God be very near to them.

My flight leaves at 3:00 a.m. on Tuesday May 13. It was a joy to have met many of you personally on my reporting trips. Pray that many of the refugees will be able to make their way to Canada soon, where relatives wait with great anticipation for them. 'An Got-tes Segen ist alles gelegen' (everything hinges on God's blessing). (MR 14 May 47 1)

## Chapter 13

### PATIENCE TESTED

*"...those who through faith and patience inherit the promises" (Heb 6:12).*

This third mission (13 May 47– 17 Oct 47) was to be a time when CF's patience was tried and tested to the uttermost. On June 4 he wrote from Stuttgart,

Patient waiting is something I have to learn over and over again. Proverbs 23:18 "Surely there is a future, and your hope will not be cut off," is a comfort to me. What is my waiting, compared to the waiting of our refugees and the millions of other refugees? Nothing." Faced by the immense cumbersome machinery of the immigration bureaucracy he felt helpless and at times became depressed and tempted to despair. He had an acute sense that the prayers of God's people were the factor that often tipped the scales of life and death decisions for the refugees. He was caught in an unbearable place between the 'rock' of all too slowly moving officialdom and the 'hard place' of suffering from which the refugees were trying to emerge.

Recently I had a meeting with five hundred Mennonite refugees, and the day after a number of them were able to share their personal stories with me. O the depth of need that some of them have had to pass through! It defies description. Take the case of BB. He was imprisoned together with seven of the neighbors from his village. He told me their names. The verdict given by the judge was, 'Enemies of the people.' There was no trial, just repeated accusations and tortures. The hunger rations aren't considered a part of that; they are taken for granted. Diarrhea was epidemic and weakened the emaciated prisoners to the point where they couldn't resist the fleas that covered them. Every day men were dying. One after another his neighbors also died. He was sleeping with the last

of them under an old coat. With a weak voice, F said, 'Let's pray, I can't endure this any longer.' When BB awoke in the morning, his dear neighbor lay motionless beside him—he had died during the night. In the raw morning air BB felt very forsaken in his crowded prison cell, with his last friend having succumbed to the inhuman treatment inflicted on them by the heartless officials. BB could hardly hold himself erect on his feeble legs so they released him to die elsewhere—but he actually made it home. His wife and two children were starving. The youngest saw him first, but was scared off, unable to recognize its own father. BB couldn't continue the story at that point. Tears were running down the haggard face of this man, who looked much older than he really was.

A young man was assisting me with some small matters on my car. I asked him if he had any relatives in Canada, and what his family circumstances were. He didn't answer right away, but then through tears and sobs I could make out, 'Wife and children dragged back to Russia.'

An elderly woman told me her story about how they had been housed as refugees with another family near Berlin. One day while they were sitting at table, a Russian soldier burst into the room, and shot her husband in cold blood. Another woman at the table was shot too. The bullet creased her skull and she slumped forward her head falling into the plate out of which she had just been eating. He shot her too, but the bullet just went into her left shoulder and shattered the bone. Their fourteen year old daughter ducked under the table and was spared. Her husband died instantly and she herself had to be hospitalized. Not long after that, her twenty-four year old son Johann found his way to them, but came down with a bad case of tuberculosis. The older boys, Peter and Heinrich, were exiled while they were still in Russia and they have heard nothing from them since. Only the mother and young daughter finally made it to West Germany. Will their flight ever end? Two brothers of her dead husband live in Canada, and would gladly provide her with a place of rest in a land of peace—but when will she be able to go?

These are just a few examples. What surprises me often is the serene way in which these troubled people recount these terrible experiences, and do so without a touch of hatred or a note of despair. How true it is that God gives us a new nature and the strength to bear the unbearable. (MR 18 June 47 1)

As he carried these sufferings on his heart it seemed to CF that no effort on his part was too great, neither could the help he was requesting from government agencies be considered any hardship compared with such stories of agony. The frustration he felt at the slowness of Canada's capacity to absorb new im-

migrants is easy to understand. Though there were various political factors contributing to this, for CF it was heart-rending to realize that the country that had been for him such a haven in time of need was now proving cold and indifferent to the plight of this new group of refugees. In a rare burst of righteous indignation he wrote to T.O.F. Herzer on June 19,

The slowness is daily costing a number of lives among the refugees here—some through suicide, some tuberculosis and other diseases, some through under-nourishment. If only we could encourage them to hold on. Their relatives write them from Canada that our immigration officials have already approved their application and that they will be called before the Canadian inspection teams any day. But here—nothing happens for months, because copies of the approved applications have not been received. They should be mailed from Ottawa by air, in spite of the extra postage. Doesn't anybody feel any responsibility for the lives lost over here, merely on account of the slowness of procedure of government machinery? We have been telling the refugees, that our democratic government cares and will see to it that they find refuge within its boundaries. But what do we have to prove this? Poor show indeed! Are we so far advanced in cruelty that human life means so little to us? Have we become indifferent to all the misery and unspeakable suffering here? One could feel like throwing a bomb into the still waters of the self-contented and overfed masses in North America, in order to arouse them! (Epp 386).

It is significant to note that for CF the 'loss of human life' referred to was no empty statistic—each case was a face with a name and a story personally related. This passionate plea for mercy came at a time when the world had finally awakened to the precise and full extent of horror and heartlessness that had characterized the Jewish holocaust. In the annals of human history, this little group of wandering Mennonites could be thankful that they were granted men to stand in the gap for them and plead their cause effectively. They could indeed thank God for CF's tenacity.

Shortly afterward CF's indignation gave way to a resigned realism as he realized his patience was going to be tested yet further. He would have to cancel the ship that had been promised for July. This was largely because of incredibly slow processing methods, particularly by the Canadian immigration in Germany. Despite CF's efforts which included telegrams to Ottawa and sug-

gestions of solutions to re-categorize refugees to facilitate the process, too few would be ready for travel by July.

I can't express in words how badly I feel about canceling the ship. At a time when every place on a ship to North America is priceless, that we should have to forego this opportunity just because of the slowness of the governmental machinery, is hard to take. Having just had an opportunity again to visit with many refugees, and having seen on their faces signs of the bitter experiences they've endured, and having heard them tell of their homeland and of their frightening escape, and being aware of how their families have been torn asunder, and how fear rises in them at the thought of being sentenced to remain another winter in war-torn Germany, then one is tempted to become angry and to sin. (MR 16 July 47 1)

CF had exhorted the churches back home to a renewed commitment to uphold the work in Europe in prayer. Now he asked himself why those prayers were not yielding more fruit. He had seen God act before. Why now the impasse?

I asked myself repeatedly last winter why it is that God having begun to open the door for refugees to Canada, doesn't throw it wide open in response to the many prayers that are rising to Him. Are there not enough clean hearts and pure hands? For they alone can truly intercede. Is God waiting for us in our congregations in Canada to repent? Would that open heaven's gates? I have a strong feeling that in the next few weeks something significant must come to pass. The same God who helped us so amazingly a few months ago in Berlin and Bremerhaven is still with us. (MR 16 July 47 6)

Faced with the ever growing numbers crowding into West Germany, the thirty successful immigrants to Canada seemed pitifully few, yet he did not neglect to give thanks even for these. "But what are they," he asked, "in comparison to the 8,500 anxiously waiting?" He encouraged himself that the new camps at Gronau and Backnang were now well equipped to shelter these and provide them with the necessary food and clothing. At least in this capacity the hearts of mercy of the home churches were not fettered, and their provision did not go unappreciated. Regular worship services in the camps attested to this.

Two new tasks presented themselves into which to channel his frustrated energies. One was the prospect of a possible ship-

ment of refugees to the United States, sponsored by the MCC. This he would pursue in Berlin. The other was the processing of about thirty relatives to join the Paraguayan group as soon as things settled down there. The external problem of the political revolution in Paraguay, brought internal problems to the surface among the Volendam refugees. Although in Germany they had all promised to go to Paraguay, now 135 decided to stay in Buenos Aires, another twenty-two would stay with the intention of getting to the United States, and ten with the intention of getting to Canada. Another ninety-seven stayed in Asuncion, awaiting an opportunity to join relatives in Canada or Brazil. All this made Peter Dyck wonder whether they shouldn't have screened them more carefully, which is what they did in the months to come. Not being as directly involved, CF was pleased that almost 90% remained true to their promise.

Most of them survived the tests they went through, and have arrived safely in Paraguay. A small group gave brother DeFehr and the Peter Dycks a rough time. A Mennonite committee will not be spared such experiences. We judge no one. God who searches the hearts of men knows what motivated the leaders of the splinter group. May His grace prevent them from losing their way and losing out altogether. Those who went on with the MCC will need the grace of God in their pioneering efforts in a strange environment. We trust that this unpleasant incident will not hinder our congregations in Canada from their wholehearted support of our relief work.

## Faith Conferences

Although CF spent much of the summer traveling from office to office making representations for the refugees to the authorities in Geneva, Lausanne, Stuttgart, Hamburg, London, and Frankfurt, another matter was on his heart, which enabled him to redeem the time while patiently waiting for a breakthrough in the refugee work. This had to do with the six month assignment that his friend Harold Bender was serving in Europe, and that culminated in the "*Basler Glaubenskonferenz*" (Faith Conference in Basel) August 16-17, 1947. Although CF was in Europe because of the refugees, his presence brought him into a very close and significant relationship with Mennonites of Europe, and

it was to them that he was now able to devote some concentrated time.

Klassen and Bender's friendship, as we've seen, went back to 1929. Bender, from his background in Anabaptist studies, and Klassen from his active involvement with the Mennonite leaders in Europe, shared a common vision for the spiritual renewal of the Mennonite churches in Europe. When Bender came to Europe in May, they planned a series of Faith Conferences to draw together the Mennonites and to encourage them in the Lord. Klassen himself was inspired by Bender's mastery of the biblical and historical materials, and Bender was impressed with the respect and trust that Klassen had earned among the Mennonite leaders through his tireless efforts on behalf of the refugees and his obvious love and loyalty to the larger brotherhood. Their initial plan was for three conferences, one in Holland, one in Basel and one in Denmark, and the hope was that they could become annual events.

The Conference in Elspeet, Holland, May 15-18, 1947, was the first international Mennonite gathering to take place after the War. One hundred and fifty delegates gathered at the Mennonite center, with representations from Switzerland, France, the USA, and Canada. The largest representation was obviously from Holland, which was strengthened by the presence of some outstanding younger leaders. The German representation didn't receive their visas on time and their absence was noticeable. From one standpoint it was a mercy, since Dutch animosity against Germans because of what they had suffered at their hands during the war was not yet fully healed. The focus of the Conference was on reports from the different countries bringing each other up to date on the state of the Mennonite churches. Some inspirational addresses were also given on the nature and mission of the church—Bender's speciality. He challenged them with his emphasis on biblical discipleship.

The second of the Conferences was the one in Basel August 16-17, meeting in the two Mennonite churches, Holee and Schaenzli. The expressed purpose, under the theme "Jesus Christ our Lord," was to fellowship together as brothers from different countries, to be strengthened in the faith and be built up through the Word of God and prayer, and to bring glory to God. In the

reports from different countries it became apparent that there was a growing longing to know Christ better and to experience spiritual renewal in their congregations. Bender delivered a keynote address on Saturday night regarding the question "What is the Church of Christ?" He stressed the fact that the Church is the visible gathering of saints who have come to newness of life in Christ. The Sunday morning theme was "Saved to Serve," and in the afternoon Rev. H.H. Janzen from the MB Bible College in Winnipeg spoke on "Our missionary mandate." In the evening, Dr. Henry A. Fast, from Bethel College in Newton, Kansas, spoke on "Non-Resistance among the Mennonites of North America."

It was at a leaders' meeting just prior to this conference, that Bender and Klassen first spoke openly about their vision for a European Mennonite Bible School. Their desire was not for a seminary to train pastors, but for a place where Mennonite youth from all the different countries and regions of Europe could come together to be grounded in the faith and in their spiritual heritage. As we will see, this vision did not fall on deaf ears.

The third in the series of conferences was in Denmark. CF was not able to work together with Bender at this last one. Because of the circumstances of the refugees this conference moved from the Oxboel Camp, on to the camps in Aalborg, Grove, and Rye. A serious spiritual hunger was manifested at these meetings, and it seemed that Bender was well received. Elder Bruno Ewert spoke on "The Gospel as the Power of God," and Elder Bruno Enns on being "New Creatures in Christ." The conferences ended with a challenging sermon by Bender on "The Biblical Basis of Non-Resistance." Although Danzig Mennonites no longer held to this principle in practice, many repented of their indifference and blindness and once again heard their Lord saying "Love your enemies."

One month after the Basel Conference on September 12 CF had a bad car accident while driving at night between Karlsruhe and Frankfurt. He had picked up a hitch-hiker, as he often did, and in the fog and rain plowed into the back of a farmer's slow moving vehicle that had no lights on it. His leg and chest were badly bruised, but he was released from hospital after a thorough examination. The hitch-hiker didn't fare as well and had to remain in hospital. CF took a real interest in him and came a

number of times to visit him and to help him. Two days later he himself was on the way to Amsterdam for further meetings, and from there went back again to Geneva.

## Processing Accelerating

By October 1947 the trickle of refugees to Canada began to increase considerably. One hundred and eighteen left Buchholz near Hannover on their way to Canada and more were to be expected. CF encouraged himself and the 'Rundschau' readers with John 16:33. "In the world you have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world."

What comfort we find in these words of our Lord and Master. Especially for our refugees, their relatives, and for us who are committed to this work. In the spring of this year we had planned that by Christmas at least 3,000 of our refugees would have come to Canada. That plan was frustrated. The International Relief Organization (IRO), that was commissioned by a number of countries to oversee the transport of refugees to the new world, not only was slow in coming into being, but has been struggling ever since to really get established. This has taken months and is still not completed. International machinery runs slowly, laboriously. On top of this, is the fact that our refugees are not in camps sponsored by UNRRA or IRO, and consequently fall outside their mandate. This was different in the case of the IGCR which had studied our case and decided that being of Dutch descent we did come under their mandate. We thanked God for this and were hopeful.

The beautiful summer months passed by. The IRO was getting organized; officials came and went. The bureaucracy kept stalling, despite sincere efforts to speed up the processing and transporting. The leading figures continued to be well-disposed towards us. The headquarters were moved from London to Geneva. We always get a good hearing from them.

At times there are minor officials who are anything but helpful, and can allow their suspicions to really drive our refugees into a corner. Because of their great fear of falling back into the hands of their persecutors, some of our refugees have understandably been ambiguous in their answers and this has compounded their problems.

To begin with the Canadian Immigration offices in Germany were overstaffed, due to the fact that IRO was so slow. But when Canada opened its doors wider to include forestry and mine

workers, and tailors and workers in heavy industry, suddenly there was a shortage of officials and vehicles. The director has always been friendly toward us but it is not within his power to make any substantial change to speed up the flow of refugees to Canada.

We must be grateful to Ottawa for having decided in favor of most of the relatives who have applied for their loved ones to come. For some reason, however, these forms were slow in coming during the summer. They seem to have been given second place to the farm and mine workers. (MR 29 October 47 1)

In encouraging the relatives of those awaiting immigration clearance CF realized he needed to be an example of patient perseverance. He repented of his earlier impatience. "I have become quite impatient in the last while; and I'm ashamed of it. When I escaped with my life in that serious car accident in September, I was deeply humbled by God's grace. It was a serious word to me." He then goes on to exhort Canadian relatives to stand with him in encouraging those in the camps to hold steady. He writes, "I realize that isn't easy. The heat and drought of last summer is going to make for an even tougher winter. Politically speaking the prospects are also bleak with the heightening tension between East and West and the rebirth of the Communist International. We as Christians must remind ourselves that Jesus is Lord and that He has overcome the world and has promised to remain with us to the end."

He further acquainted the Canadian brotherhood with the possibility of the two shipments to the United States and Paraguay. Already his concerns about the larger contingents to this country were evident. When they were finally directed to Paraguay, he did not minimize the enormous challenges this presented and the sense of disappointment it was to many after hoping to go to Canada.

CF was therefore not surprised when on arrival at the MCC executive meeting in Chicago on October 17 he was asked to take a trip to Paraguay to see first hand the conditions and circumstances facing the refugees on arrival in their new homeland. From Chicago he headed back to Winnipeg and home. The next day he was already at the CPR station with Peter Dyck, J.J. Thies-sen, and T.O.F. Herzer meeting a group of about thirty refugees who were just arriving. And once more there was a public meet-

ing at the South End MB church where CF reported on all that had transpired in Europe since he was last with them. Two days later he was in Laird, Saskatchewan for the ordination of his brother-in-law Peter J. Dyck as an Elder in the General Conference Mennonite Church. CF cherished the contribution that Peter and Elfrieda were making in the work with the refugees and was proud to be present on this important occasion.

## Chapter 14

### THE PARAGUAYAN TRIP

*"...in journeyings often..." (2 Corinthians 11:26).*

Returning to Europe in early November 1947 on his fourth mission (8 November 47–27 July 48) was unusually difficult for CF. He was overtired and was beginning to feel anxious about all the complex arrangements for the Paraguay trip. Travel in the post-War world with all the complexities of military and visa restrictions was very difficult and time consuming. The pressure of meetings and late nights was taking its toll on his energy. At such times the wrench of leaving his wife and family yet again was harder than ever. The usual last minute rush of packing accomplished, Mary, Herb and Irmy accompanied him to Winnipeg airport where his brother Frank and family also joined them to say farewell. November 6 he wrote in his diary, "This departure was more difficult for me than usual. The pressures of the impending work lay heavy upon me. There was also the family's plan to move to British Columbia and the debts this could incur. May God be gracious to me and my family." (Diary 2)

Arriving in London on November 9 he was still not feeling well and had trouble sleeping. "I don't feel well" he wrote, "it's my heart.... I also miss Mary and the children so much that I am quite unhappy." Sleeplessness continued and he tells of another disturbed night; "My heart is acting up again. I recited the 23 Psalm endlessly and prayed." (Diary 4) He was probably not in the best state of health to embark on the long arduous preparations and trip to South America. But he had made a commitment

to his people and felt the task before him was an important one. Others had far more rigorous journeys to endure. So he gathered his strength and pressed on with the matters demanding his attention.

One of these was to look into providing transportation for the next ship load to Paraguay. This took him to Rotterdam where he met with Peter and Elfrieda Dyck newly arrived from the United States on the ship Westerdam. They went together to the Paraguayan Consulate to pick up his visa for the trip. CF writes,

The Consul had my visa ready and spoke appreciatively about the first ship load of refugees to South America. The 'Volendam' had been clean, but these passengers had left it cleaner than they found it. Argentina would gladly have kept these people there. The Consul, a Christian, was very interested in the outcome of this movement. (Diary 16)

On November 30 CF arrived in Paris by train for his departure to South America. Political unrest and a general strike in the city, confusion as to tickets and visa requirements, plus delays due to a severe fog, all contributed to CF feeling very depressed and wondering if he should cancel the whole trip. He cried out to God in the midst of the 'terrible uncertainty' he was feeling, and quieted his soul.

December 1 he wrote in his diary,

Paris is in fog, and at a political deadend; everything's uncertain; the strike is spreading. Our six storey hotel is without water, light, and elevators. Climbing stairs is difficult. A few years ago I used to run up stairs. Am becoming older. I was at Air France at 8:30 a.m. Nothing flying today either. Terrible. Ticket still not certain. Pan American Airlines hesitates to provide a Rio-Asuncion ticket without confirmation from Zurich that the money has been paid. In addition, Air France thinks I need a Brazilian visa. I have no passport photos and photographers are on strike. Through the police we finally find an automat. They took me there and in eight minutes I had six photos for forty francs (officially \$1.00 = 117 francs) in which they thought I resembled Roosevelt! Ha. Quickly went to the Brazilian Consulate. The visa cost 500 francs. Fortunately I had been vaccinated against smallpox in Frankfurt, and had my eyes examined for trachoma. The papers helped me, and I obtained the visa. I ran around in Paris until my feet were sore,

and my right knee bothered me badly. This result of my auto accident will probably last. In the evening I worked using a small smoky candle which quickly burned low. Went to bed at 9:00 p.m. Couldn't read; couldn't sleep. No water. Everything in Paris continues on strike. How will things work out tomorrow? Spoke to Atlee in Basel and asked him to cable William Snyder that I will only be able to leave Rio for Asuncion on Monday, December 8. (Diary 20-21)

Because of all the delays and confusion CF was forced to stay in Rio de Janeiro longer than he planned thus missing the planned meeting in Asuncion. This frustrated him immensely and severely tested his patience. He so much wanted to be with the Mennonites on the colonies and get on with his purpose for coming. MCC had approved the plan for 2,500 refugees to go to the Paraguayan Chaco with Fernheim and Menno colonies each taking 800. The enforced wait in Rio, however, had one good aspect; it enabled him to get some rest, which God knew he sorely needed. Once he arrived in Asuncion the pace would become very stressful again, so at least for a brief weekend he could regain some strength.

Arriving in Asuncion on Tuesday, December 9 he was met by the DeFehrs and Orie Miller. The plans for travel during the ensuing days included chartered planes, trucks, jeeps and some foot travel. Road and weather conditions were very taxing with extremes of heat and cold (Orie Miller suffered severe sun-burn CF records in his diary). Sometimes the vehicles were delayed, got stuck in the mud or broke down. Yet this was a chance for the North American brethren to share the life conditions and challenges of the colonists.

Unfortunately travel delays and complications made it impossible for CF to actually visit the new Volendam colony, named after the ship. But he was able to fly low over the colony and deliver a letter dropped by parachute—the handkerchief of MCC worker, brother Warkentin! The excited and wildly waving settlers below were the closest view he got of that first band of refugees whose miraculous journey he had prayed so hard for just a year ago.

CF's diary reports frankly some of the more down-to-earth aspects of the trip. These included very hot days, shivering nights sharing a bed and blanket with Orie, swollen ankles, sore knees

and his unstable heart. This was no tourist pleasure trip, and the diary reveals the human side of CF as he struggled to place his life at the service of others. His trip also gave him opportunity to see at first hand the problems of leadership encountered by the new colonies. Ever a shrewd judge of character CF could already sense some of the difficulties that would face the settlers in the future. He already knew who could be trusted and who should be watched carefully.

Yet his report back to the *Rundschau*, January 4, 1948, written on his return flight is characteristically positive,

I had read a lot about Paraguay and had studied the newspaper reports in great detail, and now I was interested to see how close the facts resembled the mental picture I had formed. It was hot all right, but not hotter than I had imagined for this time of year. The roads, however, were worse than I had imagined and the Chaco bush thornier. But the colonies, however, were substantially better than I had imagined.

Brother Orie Miller and I were flown from Asuncion to Fort Comacho and from there taken by truck, till we got stuck. For us it was no great hardship for we got out and walked the last eight kilometers to Village No. 10. We turned in at the first farmyard which happened to be that of the Peter Neudorfs. I was surprised by the nicely furnished home with a hard, smooth clay floor. Next to it on the same yard there was another friendly looking home built in preparation for the coming refugees. I greet the Neudorfs in this way and thank them again for the friendly reception, the tasty supper, and the delightful watermelon.

The center of the town of Philadelphia also surprised me. I had not thought it would be quite as well developed. As we drew closer to Philadelphia in the late evening I was surprised too by the electric lights. They can be proud too, even by American standards, of the church buildings they've erected there and in Village No. 16.

I was very sorry that I had so little time. I would so much have liked to spend more time fellowshiping with the brethren and hearing more out of their rich store of experiences. The difficult pioneering years have left their stamp on them.

As we flew over the villages of the Fernheim Colony on our way back to Asuncion my thoughts drifted back to 1930 when the first refugees left Moscow on their long journey to Paraguay. It took them over Moelln, Hammerstein and Prentzlau; places they will never forget. They went to Paraguay, because there was nowhere else they could go. They received it out of God's hand. In the Chaco

they had to struggle for their existence. They went at it with determination and the Lord helped them. They hadn't the faintest idea then that sixteen years later they would be able to open their hearts and homes to a new influx of refugees. They had to squeeze closer together to make room for them and had to exercise a lot of patience, but they not only did it, they've now declared themselves willing to receive another 800—who should be arriving early in 1948.

There are already about 8,000 Mennonites in Paraguay, and with the new group coming it will exceed 10,000. Do we as a larger Mennonite body have a responsibility in Paraguay? I believe we do, as did some of our forebears 150 years ago when they built their little sod huts on the bare steppes of Russia, and over 150 years ago in the US, and seventy years ago in Canada.

But why exactly Paraguay, many a person will ask? Anywhere rather than Paraguay, others will say. Why was it Russia 150 years ago, where now for the past thirty years they have been persecuted and oppressed? Why to Canada seventy years ago from where some have emigrated to Mexico and Paraguay?

From a human point of view Canada would be preferred by many to Paraguay; but why compare the two today when the choice does not exist for many?

Our people have proved that one can do more than just exist in Paraguay. The progress and development of the Colonies in Paraguay is indisputable. God has blessed the hard work, done literally by the sweat of their brows. Things will improve even more once they can process their own cotton. This is one of the most urgent challenges facing them. Brothers Orie Miller, DeFehr and Warkentin are devising a plan to market their products and receive essential goods in return. May God's blessing attend their efforts.

The MCC has developed an Experimental Farm in the Chaco. Menno Klassen, an agriculturalist, is attacking the challenge of plant selection and pest control with great enthusiasm and skill. This will be of great significance to the colonies in the long run. Brother Orie Miller has been able to interest Mr. Casado in the experimental farm and he is also prepared to support it financially.

Transportation is one of the biggest problems and the postal system and telegraph also leave much to be desired. Fernheim Colony has developed its own telephone system and soon all its villages will be hooked into one system. The MCC is planning to establish radio-telephone connection with Asuncion that will link all five colonies. At least at certain times of the day quick contact between all the colonies will be possible. This will help to overcome the feeling of being isolated and cut off from the rest of the world. God's further guidance and blessing are much needed. All told, I

was left with the strong impression that the colonies of Paraguay have a future. (MR 4 January 48 1)

CF concluded his report by challenging the Mennonite conferences in North America in their spiritual responsibility for the South American colonies. One Conference had already sent B.B. Janz, a brother who had extensive experience in congregational and conference matters, to South America and God had visibly blessed his ministry. "This seventy year old brother has allowed himself to be used of God to untie some knots that were constricting the spiritual life amongst our brethren in the South. We in North America and those in South America are grateful to him for this service." (MR 4 January 48 1)

## Reflections While Traveling

In the midst of his busy life of activity, opportunities for quiet reflection were few and far between for CF. A rare opportunity presented itself on the long flight back to Paris. Flying across North Africa he began to think about the world he found himself serving. The panorama of human need and geographical diversity somehow impressed him and his reflections reveal a rare moment of awareness of the richness of the creation and of the challenges of the troubled post-war world.

From Dakar we headed north along the coast toward Casablanca. At times we couldn't see the ocean. Strange terrain. For hours nothing other than desert wastes. Am I glad that we can fly over it rather than traverse it on foot or by camel. One sees many sand dunes formed by the wind, but senses how transient it all is and how the next storm will completely alter the face of the desert. Long stretches are completely flat. Then again there are hills, one right next to the other. If they had alternating colors one would get the impression of looking down on a patchwork blanket, as is so often the case when looking down from an airplane. Now and then one sees what looks like a lonely fortress, without a tree or shrub around it. How terrible to be assigned to a place like that on some kind of term of service.

As I allow some of the places the Lord has taken me to, to pass before my mind's eye I am amazed. What a great God we have—and to think that we can call Him *our* God, it almost seems presumptuous. There is Vancouver, so beautifully nestled along

the Pacific, washed by white caps that surge ahead and then hesitate and slip back; then the Rocky mountains that in their romantic grandeur have, as it were, challenged young and old with their primeval beauty, unsullied by human hand; then the never-ending stretch of prairie in its white winter dress resembling a young bride with only an occasional farm and dark patch of trees and small town with its grain elevators disturbing the uniformity; then Ontario beginning with the stony bleakness of the great Canadian shield but then changing into blooming orchards and beautiful cities along lakes Erie and Ontario; then Quebec with its old-world flavor and its wealth of untapped resources.

Then comes the Atlantic, at times looking like a great mirror broken only by some iceberg, at other times so tempestuous that the largest ocean liner is tossed about like a nutshell (the ocean that I've crossed now fives times by ship and nine times by air). Then we come to England, with its outstandingly beautiful countryside, a nation held together by its rich traditions, and now, however, as an ex-world power struggling for its own survival; then across to the European continent that is bleeding profusely from the wounds of war, and to Germany lying in ruins cut off from its eastern half by an iron curtain behind which ruthless communist dictatorships reign supreme, stretching all the way east through China to the Pacific. And that's just skimming over the earth north of the equator. Just think of the masses of mankind south of the equator, and their unique development. How large the world is, and yet how small. Twenty-four hours ago in Paraguay I didn't know how to protect myself from the extreme heat, whereas tomorrow in Paris I'm really going to miss my warm underwear!

Nature in all its glory and in its amazing detail is an indisputable witness to its Creator, ruler and sustainer. Every bird in the air, every fish in the sea, every grain of sand on the seashore and in the vast desert we're just crossing, every flower in the field, they all bear witness to Him, their great creator. And yet there are more people in the world who don't acknowledge Him as such, than there are those who bow down and worship Him. Hard to understand. Most people don't want to give Him the honor due Him, nor leave to Him the wrath He has reserved for Himself. How sad. (Diary 58-63)

On the last day of the year, on the train between Paris and Frankfurt, while traveling through badly flooded areas, he wrote,

With the tracks submerged in places, who knows how far I will get today, and where I'll spend New Year's Eve. Again we've come to the last day of a year. In retrospect I must say I'm ashamed of all the defeats and of the many missed opportunities to witness

for my Lord, in deed and in truth. Nothing that's happened can be reversed, absolutely nothing. If only one could. But that is not to be. But as Christians we can come under the Cross and bring everything to Him, our High Priest and Redeemer, and can ask for His forgiveness. He has promised to cast our sins behind Him and never remember them again. What infinite grace to know that one is a forgiven sinner, and as such can bid the old year farewell and confidently enter the new. What a privilege! (Diary 64-65)

## More Transports

Early in the new year CF had to proceed to the Hague in the Netherlands where he completed the arrangements for the 'General Heinzelmann' for 860 refugees sometime in the second half of February. The 'Johann de Witt' would be available after April 15 and could transport about 750 passengers. From there it was back down to Geneva to negotiate with the IRO, and up to Stuttgart to see the Canadian immigration commission. He also checked in at Backnang and Gronau where the actual processing and preparations were proceeding at full tempo.

In Geneva he picked up the New York Times and was interested to see how it reported MCC's plans to send another 1,600 refugees to Paraguay. It read:

*PARAGUAY TO GAIN 1,600 MENNONITES.* World Refugee Body to move Minority that migrated from Russia to Holland. Some 1,600 Russian Mennonite refugees, descendants of a people who have been wanderers for 400 years, will be moved from German camps to Paraguay early this year by the Preparatory Commission of the IRO.

The latest migration of this often-persecuted religious group has been made possible because of the painstaking research of a Netherlands girl staff member, Johanna Hogerzell. She established that the refugees were of Netherland rather than of German ethnic origin. The refugee organization cannot under its constitution resettle persons of German ethnic origin.

About 10,000 Mennonites were swept into Germany from Russia with the retreating German armies. They were the remains of the once large colonies that migrated to Russia in the late 18th century, when they were encouraged to come by Catherine II. Their advanced agricultural methods made them specially desirable colonists at a time when vast unsettled areas of the Russian steppes were being colonized by the Imperial government.

Under the Soviet regime the Mennonites were at first allowed to continue their separate community religious life. In the last ten years, however, many of their ancient privileges have been overridden, and thousands were executed or sent to Siberia during the purges of the 1930s.

Because the Mennonites entered Russia from Germany in the 18th century, most of them have names apparently of German origin. Miss Hogerzell, however, remembered having read something about the Mennonites' origin in the Netherlands and Friesland (at that time one of the several provinces later to become the United Netherlands) in the 16th century.

On a special trip to Amsterdam early last year, she tracked down in the garret of an old church a doctor's thesis that pointed the way to indisputable sources proving the non-German origin of the Russian colonists.

Their wanderings began when, in the middle of the 16th century, religious persecution by Spain which then governed the Low Countries, forced the Mennonites to emigrate. They settled in north-east Germany, around Marienburg and Danzig, where for 200 years they prospered as farmers, using the Low Countries' methods to drain swamps and to reclaim land....

There is already a colony of Mennonites in Paraguay, as well as colonies in Nebraska, Kansas, the Dakotas, Manitoba, British Columbia and Ontario. As has often been done in past centuries, the older residents will play host to the newcomers, and a new chapter in the history of this ... people will begin.

On February 25, 1948, another big day in the refugee work had arrived. The second large group, only 860 this time, were leaving for Paraguay, accompanied by Elfrieda Dyck, alone this time. It was just over a year ago that the 'Volendam' had sailed with the first shipload. This time it was the 'General Heinzelmann' and CF was in Bremerhaven to see them off. All the prayers and the hard work seemed worth it as the ship pulled out and another group of dear brothers and sisters were heading to safety and a new homeland.

But the group of 758 refugees ready to sail for Paraguay on May 17, again escorted by Elfrieda Dyck, made refugee history in a different way. The first two sailings had their share of problems enroute, but they were minor compared to that of the 'Charlton Monarch.' On this fateful voyage almost everything that could go wrong did go wrong. First of all there was a strike among the crew,

and half of them abandoned the ship when it docked briefly in Rotterdam. Then there were mechanical breakdowns at sea that brought the ship to a standstill and, because the refrigeration units stopped working, caused most of the food to spoil. This meant that the food was not only in short supply, but what was left was partially spoiled. This led to illness breaking out among crew and passengers, and Elfrieda Dyck's nursing background was really put to the test. She reports,

Among our worst days were those during the time when we were lying at anchor at St. Vincent, Cape Verde Islands. It was then that about 80% of the passengers developed acute diarrhea accompanied by severe abdominal cramps and temperature. During this illness the people could not partake of their meals and many of them lost considerable weight. The IRO doctor stated that the cause of this epidemic was food poisoning. The British ship's doctor did not agree with this, claiming it was due to the change of air and water. Light is thrown on the subject however by the fact that none of our children under two years of age were affected, and I firmly believe that the reason for this was that my own nurses prepared and cooked all the food for our babies. Whatever the cause may have been, the fact remains that our people suffered severely. I have seen big men lying on their cots in agony, women moaning and groaning with pain, children crying with it, and some men and women fainting because of the pain (Epp 389).

Under these circumstances discouragement was rampant too. Finally the ship had to be towed into port at Recife in Brazil. From here after much discussion back and forth, it was decided to fly all the refugees to Asuncion. It was with a great sense of relief and gratitude to God that Elfrieda headed back for Europe—but even her return flight became unduly complicated and she was routed over Panama. CF certainly had reason to be proud of his sister!

With plans to send about 500 refugees on the 'Volendam' to Canada early in June (plans that were frustrated on every hand), there was no thought that CF would be able to join his family in their move from Winnipeg, Manitoba to Abbotsford, British Columbia in early May.

The June 11 sailing of the 'Volendam' did go forward, but with only 277 refugees, rather than the 500, as planned. CF was there at Bremerhaven when it left, along with Peter and Elfrieda

Dyck, and J.J. Thiessen, the new chairman of the Canadian Mennonite Board of Colonization who had taken over from David Toews when he passed away in February 1947. Thiessen had arrived in May and CF spent much of June and July escorting him to the different refugee camps, where he preached and counselled and became familiar with the people and the procedures of the great refugee work.

## Chapter 15

# CHANGES AT HOME AND ABROAD

*"redeeming the time..." (Eph 5:1).*

In CF's absence, arrangements for the Klassen family move to BC had fallen largely on Mary's shoulders. She managed to get a box car through the family's connections with the CPR, and with a truck from the DeFehrs, her sons were able to load most of their belongings. Mary and the four children then took what was left and traveled by day coach to Mission BC, arriving there on May 4, 1948.

CF's brother Nick was there to meet them along with some other associates of CF from the *Reiseschuld* days. One of them, David Rempel, a dairy farmer, had purchased a house and property on their behalf, for them to move into on arrival. It was located halfway between Abbotsford and Chilliwack just off the main Trans-Canada highway on seventy-eight acres. It was a nicer house than they were used to and Mary was a little uneasy about the size of the debt. Rempel thought the place would soon begin to pay for itself and with this in mind seven acres of strawberries were planted on the flat land alongside the Sumas River. Mr. Rempel also arrived one morning with a cow, that he thought would help to keep down the grocery bills. The boys were eager to try their hand at milking the cow and hoeing the strawberries, but they all had plans to go on with their university studies so the long range plans for farming were hardly realistic.

One month after their arrival the Fraser River overflowed its banks and many Mennonite farmers on Sumas prairie were flooded out. A number of CF's friends brought all their household belongings up to his place since it was on higher ground. Any further decisions about the place would have to wait until CF was able to break away from his work in Europe.

It was on July 27, that CF was finally able to tear himself away and return home. On the flight from Frankfurt to Montreal he wrote,

It's a strange feeling to board an airplane on this side, straight out of the midst of one's work, to keep writing on the plane and before one knows it to land in Montreal, be hurried onto another flight heading west, in order to see one's family briefly after a nine-month separation. It's hard to get used to the pace, and to the fact that my new address now is Abbotsford, not Winnipeg.

On July 29th, the 'Tabinta' will land in Quebec with another 195 of our refugees, including the well-known 'Tante Helene Baerg,' 90 years old. Interesting that she will be settling down in our former home Winnipeg.

In Rotterdam they assured us of 250 places on the 'Kota Inten' for August 10th, and another 200 on the 'Tabinta' following that. I hope and trust we will have sufficient refugees ready to fill all these places.

We had set ourselves the goal of at least 3,000 refugees coming to Canada in 1948, and it looks as if with God's help we are going to make it. If at all possible we will send even more. And this, despite all the difficulties we are plagued with. We have so much reason to thank the Lord, 'with hearts and hands and voices,' and to pray that soon the last of the refugees will be on their way. Pray especially for those detained for medical reasons, that the Lord will be glorified in their waiting.

There was much excitement when CF arrived at his new home. The house was beautifully located with a southern exposure on a shoulder of Sumas Mountain. It was a one-storey ranch style home with plenty of room. The family had enjoyed their three months there and had made new friends at the Yarrow Mennonite Church. CF himself had many friends there. In the thirties Yarrow was the largest, most flourishing Mennonite community in BC. Unfortunately its location was not very con-

venient for air travel, being about an hour and a half by car from the Vancouver airport. Yarrow had no bus connections. Two of his sons planned to be at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver in the fall.

## **Fourth Mennonite World Conference**

Some further decisions would have to be made, but in the meanwhile CF needed to leave by car for the Mennonite World Conference in Goshen, Indiana. It was decided that Harold and Herb would accompany their parents on this trip. Walfrid offered to work the strawberries, and Irmy would take care of the household.

The sessions of the Mennonite World Conference were divided between the Goshen College site in Indiana and the Bethel College site in North Newton, Kansas. Because of the War there had been no conference since 1936 in Amsterdam. It was inevitable that the war would cast a cloud over the relations of Dutch and French Mennonites to those in Germany. Some healing had happened between French and German Mennonites at the 'Glaubenskonferenz' in Basel the previous summer, but the Dutch and German Mennonites had not yet encountered each other publicly. It was a significant moment for the brotherhood when the German delegates, led by pastor Dirk Cattepoel from Crefeld and pastor Emil Haendiges formerly from Danzig, repented for their involvement in the sin of Germany and asked the Dutch brethren to forgive them. Forgiveness was extended and the reconciliation blessed the whole gathering.

CF addressed the conference on the subject "Mennonite Refugees: Our Challenge." As he rose to speak he was able to give the gathered assembly a unique view of the refugee work in Europe. After three years of seeking his brethren, the size and shape of their need was all too familiar to him. Recalling his first days in post-war Europe he said, "The many ruined cities of Germany, the countless numbers of refugees who on foot, on wagons, or on overcrowded trains streamed from the East to the West, the general picture of utter dejection and hopelessness—all this made a deep and lasting impression on me."

Recalling the various developments of refugee aid and transports CF could take some pride in the fact that some progress had been made in moving people to Canada, South America and some to the US. As always he was quick to acknowledge that without God's help and the prayers of the Mennonite brotherhood world-wide, nothing would have been accomplished. He took the opportunity to challenge those who had come together from North America for the conference to renew their prayers and practical help on behalf of all those remaining in need of help. He particularly spoke with compassion on behalf of the German Mennonite brotherhood whom he saw as victims in the nationalistic struggles of the war years. There was yet a deep need for reconciliation within the wider Mennonite family and he exhorted the conference "let us not judge too harshly the German Mennonites are trying to find their way back to the faith of our fathers. Are we prepared to help them?" (MQR April 1950 139)

For CF the plight of homeless brethren was one: all who were rendered homeless by the ravages of war, deserved the help of the wider brotherhood. In this view he anticipated the work of his next years in Europe, not only to send refugees to new homelands, but to help resettle Prussian refugees on their own West German soil in new homes.

The conference days at Goshen and Newton were very busy. There were 38 major addresses packed into sixteen sessions. The MCC was the sponsoring body, which proved to be a fruitful arrangement. Being involved as it was on an international level, it made it easier for the Europeans to feel at home among their American and Canadian brothers. Hundreds of American Mennonites had by now done service in Europe through MCC. The bankruptcy that many believers experienced as a result of the war created in many a humbler more open and teachable spirit. There seemed to be a greater hunger and openness to God at the 1948 conference than at the 1936 meeting in Amsterdam. CF at least left the fourth World Conference encouraged and inspired by the depth of fellowship and the spirit of renewal.

## Fifth Mission to Europe

His time at home was all too brief. By September 1st he was enroute back to London and Frankfurt on his fifth mission (1 Sept 48 - 21 Dec 48). He encouraged himself with these words: "We live in a fast-paced world. But the book of books challenges us to 'redeem the time, because the days are evil.' This is the true approach for believers, and the way to happiness."

On October 1948 the last large transport to South America left from Bremerhaven - including almost 1700 refugees. Getting them ready really taxed the workers in Backnang and Gronau to the limit. The experience gained from the earlier transports stood them in good stead and they were amazed themselves at how much was accomplished in the last weeks.

One matter, that boded ill for the future began to raise its head. CF reports,

Initially our work here experienced a time of plain sailing. That 90% of our Russian Mennonite refugees are of Dutch descent seemed well established. It was common knowledge that they couldn't really be classified as 'Volksdeutsche' (German nationals). It would have been nice had 'envy' not raised its head. Suddenly the fact that most of our refugees had become German citizens while in Poland (the Warthegau), had the searchlight turned on it.

We had never made a secret of this. We knew that most of our refugees had accepted German citizenship as a form of protection against the Russian bear. We knew that most of them had no plans of settling in Germany, but just looked upon their stay there as transitory until they could get to their relatives in Canada. We knew also that the German rulers in that part of Europe were eager to register them so that the eligible men amongst them could be drafted into their army.

Already in 1945 the American and British military authorities let me know that they didn't recognize this mass registration. Neither did the Soviets recognize it. They made this clear enough when they forcibly dragged thousands of them back into their slave-labor camps.

We are making every effort to resolve these problems. Please pray at home and in your congregations for the Lord's help. It is also quite clear that for some of the immigration officials the des-

tiny of the refugees is no 'heart' matter. These are evil days we are living in and injustice is rampant. Our trust is in God, and because He sees that our cause is just, we are confident He will see us through these difficulties as well.

Just before Christmas CF was happy to be able to report that,

Despite all kinds of obstacles, about 4,000 of our refugees have reached Canada already, and about 5,000 South America. Isn't this sufficient cause to be truly grateful? Our goal for 1948 had been 3,000 for Canada and now we have surpassed that mark. My fellow workers and I know how totally dependent we are on the Lord—whose mercies really are new every morning!

On December 21st, 1948, CF returned from Europe to Canada completing his fifth mission. Christmas was spent with his family at the house on McCallum Road in Abbotsford—which they had just purchased. The lovely house they had initially moved into was sold and a much more modest place was found on the southern outskirts of Abbotsford. They both felt happier with this arrangement since it meant they no longer had a debt hanging over them. CF was eager to find out how his children were progressing. Harold had completed electrical engineering in Winnipeg but had now switched to the Arts and was taking Teachers' Training at the University of British Columbia. Herb was also there majoring in history. Walfried was beginning his career as a teacher at the local Mennonite high school. Irmy was there as a student doing her final year of high school. The Mennonite Educational Institute in Abbotsford, is a private high school founded in 1946 and operated jointly by the General Conference and Mennonite Brethren. The family was now attending the South Abbotsford MB church. As usual, CF was off right after Christmas to attend the MCC executive meetings in Chicago and to do some reporting in the churches of Ontario and western Canada.

On March 10, 1949, CF returned to Europe on his sixth mission (10 Mar. 49 - 20 Dec. 49). One of the concerns on his heart had been how those refugees who had no close relatives in Canada could be helped to emigrate. He was greatly encouraged by the fact that parliament had passed the Farm labor Movement

Act on January 19th, and that the 'Board' was now able to encourage Mennonite farmers to submit applications to receive farm laborers. In April he wrote, "At present we are waiting anxiously for news from the Board in Saskatoon as to how many farm workers and their next of kin our people in the five western provinces are willing to sponsor."

Another group of refugees that he was concerned to help, were those turned down by Immigration because they had done military service. Some of these in desperation were tempted to lie in order to increase their chances. CF's response was, "To stick to the truth, to trust God, and to fill in the time doing honest work, is still the best cure for not becoming bitter. God sees the heart and leads everyone along the right path. To the land of their hopes? Not necessarily. But God is a just and gracious Father and will lead aright." (MR 13 April 49 1)

## Chapter 16

### PEACE CONFERENCE

*"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God" (Mt 5:9).*

June 17-19, 1949, CF was at the 'Thomashof,' the south German Mennonite retreat center near Karlsruhe, for a Peace Conference together with his good friend Harold Bender. Walter Quiring, a Russian Mennonite author and editor, attended this conference and gives an interesting view of CF and his part in it. The conference was called at the instigation of German Mennonite youth who had been thoroughly disillusioned by the War and the lack of clear direction offered by the church.

Due to tight post-war circumstances, Quiring cycled all the way from the Bodensee in southern Germany to the Thomashof. On his arrival he says, "I noticed a big shiny black Chevrolet in the lot, and thought to myself, that must be CF Klassen's. Then I noticed him, deep in conversation with Elder Hege from Durlach and Elder Michael Horsch from Hellmannsberg. CF is an imposing figure, a head taller than both of them." Once they had all moved into the meeting room, CF was up front with the rest of the speakers. Quiring describes him as "looking very thoughtful, sober, serious; characteristically CF." (MR 4 January 50 2)

This was an historic meeting, because it was the first time ever, that German Mennonites had gathered for a conference where the biblical doctrine of non-resistance as a faith-principle and life-stance, was the main subject. The turnout was far beyond what had been expected. There was a sense of urgency

in the gathering, a desire to get to the root of the matter. It was a full program: twenty talks by eleven men, seven from America, three from Germany and one from Switzerland. Bender's input on both the biblical basis and the historic background was much appreciated.

CF's talk on "Our Witness against War and for Peace," represented a kind of concluding summary. He surveyed the devastations of war all around them— a million dead on battlefields, countless civilian casualties and further millions homeless and displaced. He acknowledged the seemingly weak voice of the peace church witness but encouraged true disciples of Jesus to be faithful as He was, despite seeming rejection and persecution.

When the Spirit of God rules in us, the world around us becomes aware of it. It cannot be otherwise. Our witness will not, however, be accepted readily everywhere, because the world prefers darkness to light, and the wars of the future will increase in cruelty, horror and demonic dimensions until that last great war against Christ and his church. In spite of this, we are responsible to witness to those around us and to our government, whether we are respected or insulted because of it. (*Der Mennonit* November 49 87)

Quoting Karl Barth, he linked the *life* of the believing community, the church, to its *spoken* witness. It is what the church *is* that speaks most forcefully for Peace. This means not just laying down weapons, but also

active non-resistance which is prepared in the Name of Christ to sacrifice in order to bring help to the suffering, and to save lives rather than to destroy them.

We will be able to witness for peace only:

1) if we as farmers, workers, and businessmen are prepared to use the extra income which we gain through higher prices occasioned by war for helping others who are suffering

2) if our children are not afraid to interrupt their education, or to temporarily give up their career, or to leave a good job, in order to serve for a period of time in a simple but sometimes difficult form of alternative service to benefit others;

3) if our congregations bear the costs of such alternative service, not only without complaining but with glad and thankful hearts, insofar as these costs are not covered by the state. This

would also be a clear testimony for peace, and against war;

4) if we properly value the power of the printed word and offer a clear testimony for peace and against war in our Mennonite publications, particularly in popular pamphlets as well as in more scholarly dissertations;

5) if our speakers preach the clear words of life—the simple gospel, and do not fail to challenge their congregations to live a holy personal life, and do not hesitate to preach a clear stand on non-resistance and attempts to maintain peace;

6) if we pay attention to our Mennonite schools to make sure that Christian non-resistance is taught and practiced, in addition to the teaching of all other necessary courses. It should not consist of philosophical discussion, but deal with everyday practical living;

7) if we above all else, allow ourselves to be led by the Spirit of Jesus in our personal lives, in our family life, in our congregations, in our efforts to help others, and our community organizations. Then we will be a good influence on others. We should not deceive ourselves, our testimony for peace and against war will fall on deaf ears if our words are not backed by our actions.

How can we do all of this? The whole matter must be considered more seriously than we are wont to do. How can our testimony be convincing? Only if we take seriously the warning of Christ in Luke 11:35 'that our light be not overcome with darkness.'

May God give us grace to be steadfast so that our testimony may be used in the growth of His Church here on earth, so that His Kingdom—the Kingdom of Peace—may come" (*Der Mennonit* November 49 87).

A very positive resolution was drafted at the conclusion that was to be distributed and discussed in all the German Mennonite churches. Not everyone was convinced of the truth of Christian non-resistance, but at least the issue was out in the open and could be freely examined.

### **Mennonite Historical Society Meeting**

On the Sunday, time was set aside in the afternoon for a meeting of the German Mennonite Historical Society, at which Dr. Horst Penner gave a lecture on "Turning Points in the History of

the West Prussian Mennonites." Quiring was there and writes,

No sooner had Horst Penner finished, than CF arose and went over to the podium, obviously deeply moved, and said: 'This Dr. Penner who has just spoken to us, has done our brotherhood and the cause of emigration a great and significant service with his doctoral dissertation. Let me explain.'

Just after our first large transport of refugees left for Paraguay January 1947, I flew to London hoping to receive some financial assistance from the Inter-Governmental Committee on Refugees. I knew this agency from back in 1945. I also knew Sir Herbert Emerson, the director personally. I was invited to a meeting of their committee to present my concern. About eight or nine were present. Sir Herbert asked me, to begin with, how we had managed to get our refugees out of Berlin. I related the story briefly and closed by saying it was my personal conviction that we had experienced a miracle and that we had prayed our threatened brethren out of Berlin. Sir Herbert was moved by the account and couldn't hide his emotions. Then he asked, "Yes, and what do you want from us?"

'Financial help,' I said, 'because it is not going to be easy for us as a small church group to transport all our refugees out of Germany and help them get settled.' The question of their ethnic origin had come up earlier in our discussions, and he asked now if I could prove that 90% were really of Dutch descent. I said, not right now, because most of the historical documents are in archives in the United States.

But it was clear that Sir Herbert was well disposed toward us and wanted to help us. He decided to appoint a Commission of two scholars to be sent to Holland to investigate the matter. He did this out of consideration to the Polish Communist members of the Commission. The Russian members had withdrawn in July 1946.

In Holland the Commission co-opted a Dutch scholar and approached Mennonite scholars at the University of Amsterdam. After a week in hospital I flew to Holland but the news I got there wasn't encouraging. The English Commission had found nothing to substantiate my claim. They had reached the point where they were going to drop their investigations and return to England. We didn't give up, however, and went to prayer.

At precisely that point Hylkema and Hogerzell came up with Dr Horst Penner's dissertation 'The Settlement of Dutch Mennonites along the Vistula from the mid sixteenth century until Prussian Times.' In the appendix was a list of the family names of these Dutch settlers.

What a find that was! Just what we needed, laid out in scholarly detail. With that, the Commission returned to England—mission accomplished!

A week later I was back in London and sensed right away that the ice was broken. Sir Herbert and his co-workers were convinced, and I was promised \$160,000. And for this we are especially grateful to our young scholar sitting here, our dear brother Horst Penner.

The transport cost us twice that amount, but what a help it was—and furthermore it established a precedent from which we have benefited ever since. In this way we again experienced God's direct help.

Ever since then, I've felt a need to mention in Mennonite circles that scholarly historical works, in the providence of God, can be of great significance—even practically, financially! (Quiring MR 4 January 50 1)

## Traveling Companions

Right after the Historical Society meeting Quiring and Klassen met outside and CF asked whether he was busy or would have time to travel along with him over Frankfurt to Gronau. Quiring picks up the story,

"The unemployed always have time," was my answer. "I'm always ready to travel."

"Good, we'll be leaving in an hour."

I packed quickly, turning my bicycle and some other things over to the Schnebeles for their safe keeping, wrote a note to my wife, and before I knew it we were on our way in his shiny Chevrolet.

CF maneuvered his way through the narrow streets of Durlach as if they were his home town. Once in a while our American car elicits looks with a touch of hatred in them.

"But those looks certainly don't apply to us Mennonites," says CF.

The reading on the dashboard says 107,000 km. He's put them on in a year and a half..

We soon came to an on-ramp to the Autobahn where we began

to accelerate from 70 to 80 to 100 to 110 k.m.h. I had never been in a car at this speed before. But the Autobahn is wide and well made and after a time one hardly feels the speed.

We passed Mannheim off to the left. The Autobahn by-passes larger cities.

"It was here close to Mannheim," says CF, "that I once had an interesting experience. It was on a Sunday morning, and my carburetor gave out. I tried everything, but finally had to stop and take it apart. It was, as I said, Sunday morning, and I was on my way to a church dedication. I had a black suit on. I was soon surrounded by curious onlookers, young and old. Comments were dropped revealing considerable know-how.

"Well, I wonder if the American will get the things back together again?" There was general agreement that I didn't look like I would know much about auto mechanics. They also assumed that I didn't know a word of German.

"Yes, the American did get the thing back together. As I was pulling off my gloves ready to get back into the car, I said to the surprised onlookers, 'Ich danke Ihnen, meine Herrschaften, fuer die freundliche Anteilnahme, und der Amerikaner hat es doch geschaafft' (Many thanks, dear friends, for your kind interest; and the 'American' managed it, after all!).

The long faces quickly broke into smiles as they waved goodbye.

"I usually pick up hitch-hikers," said CF. "Not at night time, however. So many people have been uprooted these last years, and create quite a problem. Recently someone cut a neat hole in my window, and emptied the car of all its contents. On another occasion I left my suitcase at an hotel entrance for just a split second, but somebody noticed and took off with it. Once my Rolleiflex camera disappeared right out of my hotel room."

Late afternoon we began to approach Frankfurt. Frankfurt is CF's headquarters. You can tell that he knows the city like the back of his hand. Our destination is Schlosserstrasse 3, a quiet street with nicely landscaped front yards. The Germans had to vacate this area and it now houses Americans exclusively. Almost every house has an American car parked out front. All you hear spoken is English. Every gate has a sign on it: No Admittance. Next to it you can read the occupants name.

It is a pleasant two-storey house divided into five apartments. The other four are occupied by American military personnel. The sign on the gate says: U.S. Army, no admittance, trespassers will be prosecuted. He has two rooms, an office and a bed room. Every

available surface in both rooms is covered with books and papers and files. In the hallway was a pile of German mail that had come in his absence. The pile that came by military post from overseas was much larger.

CF sits down at his desk and begins to go through the mail. In the first letter there is a list of refugees on their way to Canada on the last sailing of the 'Scythia.'

"Yes," he says, "today we focus on the length of the list, the total number. But in the first years, what difficulties we had to overcome before even a small group was ready to leave."

Our first stop in the morning is at the Post Office. CF is expecting a small package of parts for his car. "Without them we can't continue on our journey," he says. At the fifth place we finally get them installed.

At one stop, where a minor official ('Beamter') has to fill out a certificate for him and misspells a simple German word, Klassen says to me "What more can be expected under the circumstances; many of the competent people today are hauling manure and sweeping the streets."

It is obvious with what great care CF watches over his car. He treats it almost like a living being.

At the military Post Office CF comes out with another stack of mail. While stepping into the car, he says in Low German, "Daut woet sendoog wada ne korte Nacht" (It'll be a short night again Sunday). I ask whether he doesn't have any secretarial help. "Yes, but she works elsewhere during the day and can only help evenings or Saturday afternoon."

Then we had to take his car to a garage to have the brakes overhauled. It will be late afternoon before we can get away. I can't help but notice, during all this hectic back and forth, how calmly CF takes it all. Without doubt that's easier on the nerves.

On our way back to the apartment, he tells me the tragic story of Mrs. Kaethe Toews, whose funeral he attended recently. Her grandfather was Cornelius Reimer from Gnadenfeld. She was buried in Wolpertshausen near Schwaebisch Hall. At the outbreak of the war she was living in the Crimea with her four year old daughter. The fact that she was down with typhoid protected her from being exiled eastwards. Her little daughter, however, was taken to Siberia.

Once she had recovered she nursed four wounded German soldiers for quite some time. Then the German troops began their great retreat. She herself ended up in Germany. The only Ger-

mans she knew were the four soldiers, so she tried writing to them, only to find out that three of them had died. The fourth one, however, Kress was his name, invited her to come to Wolpertshausen. She was soon able to open a kindergarten and due to her good work was well-liked. Then she became sick. The root of her sickness was diagnosed as emotional. Nothing could be done; her heart just seemed to be giving up. CF visited her during this time and tried to encourage her. Such composure, confidence and inner joy in the face of death, is the sure mark of a Christian, he concluded.

Finally out on the Autobahn I asked him, "What kind of reception have the Russian Mennonite refugees found in Germany?"

"It differs very much from place to place. One can say in general, that the German farmer ('Bauer') hasn't demonstrated much understanding for our refugees. Most of them just tried to get as much cheap labor out of them as they could. After a few notorious cases of inadequate housing and inhumane treatment became public, we sent an MCC worker around to inspect situations with an eye to improving them.

Things came to light at times that reflect badly on German society. At one farm we found a Mennonite refugee woman and her daughter in the middle of a cold winter, huddled together in an unheated room. They were sitting on a ragged cot with a watery soup as their main diet. And in the midst of this the farmer was trying to force as much work as possible out of this poor creature.

In another case the little shed, overcrowded with refugees, was attached to the pig barn. The smell that they had to endure night and day, was unbearable and also unhealthy. On top of this the food was poor and the farmer's work demands were unreasonable."

It was about 2:00 in the morning when we saw the welcome road sign with 'Gronau' on it. There was not a soul on the streets. When we got to the MCC house it was locked. We finally woke them up, only to find out that they were full up and that they had rented us a room at Hotel Brinkmann. We hurried over, but no amount of knocking and banging was of any avail. Finally the night watchman from the van Delden factory across the street came over, and offered to help us. Into the quiet of the night he hollered "Herr Brinkmann, get up, some Americans are here!" That worked. Lights went on and soon we heard some shuffling footsteps.

After a few hours sleep we made our way down to the MCC house on Enschederstrasse.

CF left me here for a week while he went off on other business. I was able to visit with some old friends and make some new

acquaintances.

The evening he returned, there was a baptism in the Camp. Cornelius Wall had prepared forty-four candidates, and Erland Waltner baptized them. It was a glorious occasion.

During the service CF arrived back from Holland together with Harold Bender. At the end of the service he was surrounded by people, asking questions, bringing greetings, shaking hands etc. I overheard someone say, "If Klassen is still so calm, then everything is going to work out all right."

The next morning we left to return to Frankfurt. I noticed right away that the right side of the car was pushed in. CF told me how it happened. His tires were pretty badly worn, but he hoped they would last till the fall. On the Autobahn the left front tire suddenly blew. He was able to keep the car under control and put on the spare. Fifty-five miles from Gronau the right front tire blew, but this time he lost control and sideswiped a tree. To his amazement, after he replaced the tire, he was able to drive on to Gronau.

As we were nearing Duesseldorf, the right back wheel fell off, and there was suddenly no braking power. Without getting ruffled, he brought it to a standstill. A fire had broken out around the rear axle, but CF put it out with his handkerchief before I could cross the seat and get out. My door was jammed. To make matters worse the horn got stuck, and was blaring. CF got out his little pocket knife and dealt with that as well.

I said, "We were lucky that time."

"That's not luck, that's Divine protection!"

A motorcyclist who had witnessed the whole scene stopped and told us where to look for the tire, which I went to fetch fifty meters off into the bush. The axle had broken—probably in the original accident. CF walked back to a garage and I stayed with the car. It was a few hours before he got back. "Siegfried Janzen is going across into Holland to fetch an axle and will bring it to us." It finally arrived, quite late, and they finally had to acknowledge that they couldn't install it themselves. A large truck stopped and offered to load the car and take it to Frankfurt for 40 DM. We had to stay in the car, which wasn't all that comfortable. We finally got to Frankfurt in the early morning hours and dropped the car off at a garage that CF uses. Finally we got back to Schlosserstrasse 3. After a shower and some good coffee we were ready for the day.

While I was still there a Hungarian Bishop called to make an appointment to see CF. He told me about a Ukrainian delegation that arrived once asking him if he could declare them all Men-

nonites, and then help them. (MR 12 April 50)

At this point Quiring's candid observations of CF and his lifestyle were cut short. Harold Bender had appeared in Frankfurt and offered Quiring a ride back to the Thomashof retreat center where the journey had begun.

This episode with Walter Quiring was not an exception. CF loved people and taking them along on his trips was a part of his regular routine as MCC ambassador in Europe. Another example of this side of his work is his kindness to two of the MCC nurses at the Gronau refugee camp the following spring. One of them, Martha Thiessen from British Columbia, was the daughter of his good friend FC Thiessen who was teaching Bible and German at the Mennonite Educational Institute. Thiessen passed away suddenly on February 20, 1950 and CF made a special trip to Gronau to break the news to Martha and to preside at a memorial service. Martha took courage and decided not to return to Canada for the funeral but to continue on in her ministry to the refugees. Her willingness to stay touched CF's fatherly heart.

A few weeks later, when CF was in Neuwied on settlement business, he arranged for Siegfried Janzen the director at Gronau, to bring Martha and her fellow nurse Helen Janz from Coaldale, Alberta, to Neuwied. From there CF took them along with him on his return to Frankfurt. They traveled along the scenic Rhine and he showed them some of the castles and other historic spots that they had not yet seen. He also hosted them at a restaurant near the famous 'Lorelei.' In Frankfurt he dropped them at the MCC center while he took care of his mail and other matters.

The next morning he took them along to Heidelberg and then on to Karlsruhe and the Thomashof. Here he introduced them to his good friend Benjamin Unruh, who had also known F.C. Thiessen, and to Johannes Hodel at the Batzenhof. CF wanted them to see what a proper German *Hof* is like. There is nothing quite like them in America. In this case the long driveway winds through an orchard and then ends up in a kind of courtyard surrounded on three sides by inter-connected buildings, one of which is the main dwelling, and the others being barns and workshops. This *Hof* was particularly well-known for its warm

hospitality. Over-night guests always seemed welcome and no one went short of food. CF knew, because for him the Batzenhof was his home away from home. The Batzenhof is like most of these estates, which are leased on a long term basis, and are situated on a few hundred acres of land devoted to agriculture.

From the Batzenhof they traveled on to Wurzburg, Rotenburg, Stuttgart (where CF had a number of business calls to make), and on to Reutlingen, where they stayed with Elder Fritz Hege, pastor of the Mennonite church. The next day being Sunday and Mother's Day, they stayed for the Service. Hege preached and CF was asked to share on the Mother's Day theme, which he was delighted to do. From there it was on to Munich and finally back to Frankfurt—where Siegfried would pick them up on his way back to Gronau.

When the Janzens, the two nurses and CF were all in Frankfurt at the end of the tour, CF arranged to have them all speak on to a tape that would be sent back to friends and relatives in Winnipeg. They shared impressions from their work at the refugee camp in Gronau, and the nurses shared about their trip through Germany with 'Onkel Klassen.'

Later in the summer Martha came down with a bad case of eczema, and it was at CF's insistence that she was taken to a medical 'Kur-Ort' that specialized in helping eczema sufferers. When Cornelia Lehn, another MCC worker from Canada, became quite ill, he took her to a treatment center at Eppenheim just north of Frankfurt, where he was able to visit her on a number of occasions and encourage her during her seven week convalescence. This kind of concern for individuals and attention to detail endeared him to his fellow workers and friends and was long remembered.

## Chapter 17

### A 'DARK VALLEY' FOR EMIGRATION

*"As they pass through the Valley ... thy make it a place of springs" (Ps 84:6).*

CF received a great shock when on July 23, 1949, IRO-Geneva issued an order that virtually stopped all Mennonite movements from Europe to both the US and Canada. He immediately went to Geneva and found out that the IRO eligibility officer reported that 30-40% of all Mennonite refugees had served in the German armed forces and had taken up German citizenship voluntarily, not under duress, as was at first believed. CF challenged these facts and figures, but at this stage the Order stood firm:

- 1) No Mennonite who had become a German citizen was entitled to IRO help,
- 2) The processing of all Mennonites was to be halted immediately (with the exception of those who had already obtained a Canadian visa),
- 3) All Mennonites, who had already passed the IRO-eligibility test, be processed again with special attention to their German naturalization and military service.

What was to be done? On July 30th, Klassen says,

I called all our co-workers together from Gronau, Fallingbostel, and Backnang for a meeting in Frankfurt. We reflected on what

the Lord had done for us in the past, and thanked Him sincerely. We reviewed our present dilemma carefully, and then went to prayer. We who stand here in the Lord's service, look to Him for His help. And we ask for your prayers, for the refugees and for us, that the Lord will deliver us out of the dark valley our work has sunk into. (MR 10 August 49 1)

Pray hard and work hard, was CF's approach. Frank Epp says of him, "With characteristic vigor and determination CF Klassen now undertook to work at removing this latest obstacle." (407) He immediately contacted the IRO officials in Washington by telephone, and also MCC headquarters in Akron. After some quick deliberations, Orie Miller and William Snyder requested he come at once for consultations in Washington and Ottawa, so he returned to North America on August 8th. They received sympathetic hearings in both capitals and on August 10th the IRO-Ottawa office wired IRO-Geneva as follows:

"Klassen, Thiessen, Snyder, have protested to Immigration and Labor against IRO reversal previous eligibility decision. Klassen claims no new facts apparently produced. Understand US delegates Warren and Carusi support this protest. No change in Canadian policy re acceptance of Mennonites that is subject to usual immigration and security requirements. Would appreciate full cable report as Labor anxious to place group of farmers from Gronau by mid- September." (Epp 407)

But during the next weeks and months, nothing changed. The work at Gronau had ground to a halt. There was an uncanny silence in the hallways. CF encouraged his heart with a poem he came across entitled "Could Anything be Impossible for Him?" Each stanza, after surveying the tribulations and griefs common to man, closed with the couplet: "One there is who understands you, Jesus alone; could anything be impossible for Him?"

After nine weeks of praying and working and waiting, the breakthrough came. He wrote,

Today, September 26th, I received the happy news by telephone from Geneva, that the obstructive clause has been removed and that a new draft is being prepared. I am to come to Geneva as soon as possible. The Lord has done it. His hour came, and with it the answer to many prayers. (MR 5 October 49 1)

In Gronau another 'shout' went up, and the busy tempo resumed. It could be felt in the atmosphere throughout the Camp. In his report CF says, "The old routine of activity from early till late is back. On Wednesday the representative of the labor Department is coming to consider the farm workers, and a week from today the Canadian medical team is arriving together with the security and passport officials. Former refugees will know best what the mood is like at Gronau in times like this." (MR 26 Oct. 49:1) In short order 400 refugees were ready for the Canadian Commissioners. It wasn't actually until October 3rd that CF was in Geneva for the signing of the new agreement, which officially withdrew the July 23 order.

### **The 'Samaria'**

It was only ten days later on October 13th that the 'Samaria' lifted anchor for Canada with 357 Mennonite refugees aboard. CF reports,

I left Gronau early this morning headed for Cuxhaven where I wanted to wish this group a pleasant journey and a happy welcome on the other side. As I traveled I was filled with mixed feelings. How much had transpired between July 23 when everything came to a halt, and today. How tangibly the Lord had shown us again that He alone is able. It's been like that ever since the MCC took up the challenge in 1945, since I located the first refugees. We have lived in the intervening years from one answered prayer to the next. Not all our prayers, nor those of the refugees and their relatives, have been answered as we had hoped, but we have had to acknowledge again and again that the Lord doeth all things well. Isolated ones set back, might not find it easy to admit this. We can understand that, and realize full well that many a 'why' will not be answered until much later.

My words of farewell to the refugees on the Samaria today are based on Psalm 138:7

Though I walk in the midst of trouble,  
Thou dost preserve my life;  
Thou dost stretch out Thy hand against the wrath of my enemies,  
And Thy right hand delivers me.

My dear brothers and sisters: Whether we are lifted up and filled with joy or whether we are downcast and grieving, it is often

the Psalms from which we derive comfort and strength. Probably because the Psalmist has gone through what we are experiencing. The above verse does exactly that; it reflects what we have passed through together in the preceding months. While walking in the midst of trouble and fear, the Lord quickened us even during the dark times when all processing had stopped. We had often faced difficulties in our refugee work, but in the period from July 23 to Sept 26, we literally walked in fear. But the answer to our many prayers came, and with it came also much work—which is what we are here for.

I feel a need to draw your attention to the work of Siegfried Janzen, Lois Yake and the many other brothers and sisters in Gronau. We need to thank them for their tireless efforts during the last weeks. They were faithful, and endured to the end, often going without sleep. It wasn't easy for them. I also feel a need to thank the Canadian authorities for their efforts and for their concern for the needs of the individuals involved. Many problematic cases were passed. Each is a miracle of its own.

My dear friends, finally you are on your way to Canada. I'm sure you've thanked God repeatedly for His help. Continue to give Him the glory, so that your behaviour as well will glorify His name:

1) Glorify God already on the ocean journey. A large percentage of the passengers are Mennonite Christians. The crew should sense the difference.

2) Glorify God when you reach your goal in Canada. Will there be disappointments there? One way or another they cannot be avoided. But be true to your covenant, made here, when things looked so hopeless. Don't give your relatives or employers there, any occasion for regret, even when things don't go exactly as you had hoped.

3) Glorify God as you identify with a fellowship of believers in Canada. Join a church as soon as possible and seek to be of service in the church. Don't come on as those who know it all. Restraine yourself rather, and hold off on your criticisms until you've settled in and understand the situation better. That you have to work hard in Canada to get ahead, you will discover all too soon. In the midst of it, may you find great joy and many opportunities to help others.

4) Glorify God as you remember prayerfully the tears of those fellow refugees who are still waiting to come.

5) Glorify God as you remember those who have been turned back for medical or other reasons. Pray for them and write to them occasionally. It will not only bless them, but will help you to be more content.

6) Glorify God as you pray for us who continue to work here. Pray that we will be enabled to make the right decisions and bring glory to God. It would also give us great joy to hear how you are faring.

God's blessing to you on your ocean journey. May you have a calm crossing. But should it be rough, and many get seasick, remember that, as bad as it is, it will stop as soon as the rocking stops!

We know you are resolved to make it easy for the Canadians to love you. Remember that this will encourage them to keep supporting the MCC until the last refugee has been helped.

In two weeks you will no longer be refugees. God bless you, young and old, and make you a blessing. (MR 26 October 49)

### **The Hard Core Cases**

Altogether there were 1,635 refugees who emigrated to Canada in 1949. This was about 2,000 less than in 1948, but the total to date was 6,005—an encouraging figure in light of the many problems that were encountered right from the beginning. Along with those who had sailed to South America, it meant that 10,510 had been brought out of Europe.

Returning from his trip home in February 1950 the continuing burden of the hard-core cases lay heavy on CF's heart. Of the 1,130 refugees left, about 200 still qualified for Canada under existing regulations. About 150 had hopes of getting to the US. Another 100 planned to join relatives in Paraguay, and another 234 had applied to go to Uruguay. This still meant there were about 500 for whom there seemed to be little hope. Among these were 360 medical rejects, many of whom had tuberculosis and trachoma, and others had physical defects of one kind or another—deafness, blindness, crippling from polio, even varicose veins, hernias, ulcers etc. The last 140 had served in the 'Waffen SS' or the German 'Wehrmacht.'

CF in Europe and J.J. Thiessen in Canada, now gave their undivided attention to helping these difficult cases. CF referred to their efforts as 'applying the crowbar' to the obstacles that were in the way. Both Klassen and Thiessen took as their motto the declaration of Moses before Pharaoh "there shall not a hoof be left

behind." One way or another every refugee should be helped.  
On April 2nd CF reported

The last weeks have been difficult ones for us. Added to our bad experiences with the US, was the fact that we were being denied exit visas from Germany because of the fateful Warthegau registration. The fate of all our emigrants to Canada and Paraguay was suddenly called into question again. It looked as if our emigration plans were running aground. We prayed and planned, and sought for a way forward. Things looked dark, very dark. What an embarrassment! But our eyes were on the Lord, looking to Him for his answer. When it suddenly came, we were taken by surprise.

The Canadian Christian Council for Resettlement of Refugees (CCCR) with headquarters in Winnipeg, had all the while been lobbying Ottawa on behalf of the admission of these Eastern block refugees who had been registered as Germans. For months on end, DR TOF Herzer in particular, had been fighting for their cause. The Canadian government reviewed the whole matter carefully and then decided in their favor. This was expressed in Order in Council #1606 on March 28th, 1950—which not only opened Canada's doors to them but relaxed other restrictions as well for German emigrants. God was obviously watching over our concerns and answered the prayers of many thousands of his children.

I was deeply moved by this action of our government. Not only did thankfulness to our government rise in my heart, but also a touch of pride. May God's blessing rest on our federal cabinet, our MPs and our whole land, and may God protect us from political catastrophes. Thank God for this bright ray of hope in our refugee work! On March 30th, Dr Herzer and I had a happy reunion at the Hamburg airport.... How we rejoiced together at the prospect of a new surge forward in the emigration movement. Truly, 'Gott kann!' (MR 12 April 50 1)

In September 1950 CF was in Ottawa meeting with the Immigration and Labor departments about his hard-core cases. More and more obstacles were gradually being removed. From Ottawa he flew to Washington where, together with Wm Snyder efforts were made to speed up the flow to the US.

Unfortunately it never became more than a trickle (as few as 6 during 1948 and a maximum of 113 in 1949).

At a meeting of the German Relief committee in Frankfurt in late spring 1951, it was agreed that CF should visit the various settlements of Danzig refugees in North Germany to encourage them to consider joining the emigrations to Canada or South

America. Some of MCC's transportation plans had to be cancelled because so few of them had been willing to consider this option. It was his conviction that for the sake of their children, more of them should take courage and emigrate. His efforts bore fruit as could be seen in the fact that on August 15th 1951, 442 Danzig refugees left from Genoa, Italy for Uruguay.

The 'Waffen SS' issue was one of the most challenging of CF's struggles over the hard-core cases. The S.S. troops were traditionally an elite division of fanatic Nazi volunteers who Hitler organized as a special bodyguard (going back to the early thirties) and as the Secret Police, the infamous 'Gestapo.' They also served as concentration camp guards. It is from these three groups that the S.S. primarily gained its reputation. Such people Immigration could understandably consider as undesirable. But CF discovered that the 'Waffen S.S.' was a different matter, and by the end of the War was made up of thirty-five divisions of regular conscripts. In some of the east European countries, whole villages of 'Volksdeutsche' were forcibly and indiscriminately enlisted into the 'Waffen SS.' It was a matter of join, or be shot. Among these were hundreds of Russian Mennonite refugees, many of whom never survived the War and the Prisoner of War camps. Those who did, were now among the refugees seeking entrance to Canada, but repeatedly being turned down because of this matter. Some tried to cover up the truth and got themselves into even deeper trouble.

It was CF's friend T.O.F. Herzer, working through the CCCRR, who was most helpful in changing the government's policy toward these security rejects. Already in April a year earlier Herzer had on return from Germany introduced new evidence on these men to the Department of Citizenship and Immigration. This was followed up by a concession toward those who had joined the 'Waffen SS' after January 1, 1943. It wasn't until April 1952 that CF was able to present thirty-two cases to the Canadian Immigration Commission in Hannover, and found out to his delight that most of them were approved.

At the end of that year, on December 21st, CF was with the Mennonites of the Bremen area, in a meeting at the YMCA, which combined their annual Christmas celebration with a farewell service for another group of refugees who had made it through the

screening process. CF spoke to them about Christmas and the new life opening up to them, from John 10:11 "I am come that you might have life, and have it more abundantly." The next day he was on board the 'Beaverbrae' with them, speaking to many of them personally and shaking their hands for the last time. With these hard—core cases, God's ability to help was becoming more and more visible. And on the last day of the year the Gronau staff were able to move into their new quarters in Bremen. Another milestone in the refugee work had been reached.

### **The Ongoing Refugee Challenge**

The broader refugee challenge, however, was an ever-increasing one. This became clear to CF, the following February when he visited Berlin and attended some of the meetings the Senate had organized to deal with the refugee problem. The needs of the total refugee situation in Berlin were staggering, so foreign relief agencies were called in to assist. From February 1 to 9, 10,000 refugees flooded into Berlin from East Germany. The government in Bonn had committed itself to fly out 700 refugees per day.

Seeing refugees always touched CF deeply.

We visited a new refugee camp in West Berlin. It is housed in a partially bombed out factory that had some quick repairs done to it so that it could accommodate 3,000 refugees. Already there are over 4,000 squeezed into it with more arriving every day. We actually saw the refugees lying there on thin straw mats spread out on the concrete floor. Among them are many healthy looking farmers, who so feared forced collectivization or deportation to Siberia, that they had left everything behind and fled. They could probably make a go of it in Canada and soon be on their feet. Measles and scarlet fever had broken out among the refugees, and because the hospitals in Berlin were overcrowded as result of an influenza epidemic, the refugee camps had to make their own arrangements to look after the patients. Once one has witnessed the tragic situation of the refugees with one's own eyes, one can't shake it any more. May God grant us the readiness to do what we can. (MR 25 February 53 1)

The dark valleys in the refugee work, were experienced by CF and his co-workers, not as daunting set backs or impossible

obstacles. Rather they became for them the opportunity to draw on God's grace and strength, and many times see their faith rewarded in answered prayers. The dark places truly became a 'valley of springs.'

## Chapter 18

# HOMES FOR THE HOMELESS

*"I was a stranger and you welcomed me..." (Mt 25:35).  
..."bring the homeless poor into your house" (Is 58:7).*

Although CF had poured much energy into resolving the difficulties standing in the way of refugees desiring to emigrate from Europe, it was becoming clear that a very great challenge was presented by those who were unable to leave Germany. These were those who for reasons of health and old age, would never be granted permission to emigrate. The need of this group was a burden CF carried on his heart, and he shared the determination of the Germans themselves to find creative solutions to the dilemma. He felt great compassion for the refugees and their long years of pilgrimage and he wanted to complete his years of work among them with a provision of homes for the reunited families and a place of 'safe haven' for the elderly who no longer had families to care for them. These two areas formed the double thrust of the work of resettlement within Europe itself that was to occupy CF during much of the remainder of his time in Germany.

### **Old Peoples' Homes**

It was in 1949 that CF first shared a concern that a home be established for elderly refugees. His two friends, Richard Hertzler and Fritz Stauffer, both active in the German Mennonite Relief Agency (Hilfswerk der Vereinigung deutscher Mennoniten), were the first to take up the challenge, and together with them

he called a meeting for May 23, 1949. At this meeting the first concrete steps were agreed upon, by way of an open appeal to all German Mennonites to trust God for such a home, and to offer their gifts and services. The response was gratifying. The MCC offered food and blankets and many gifts came in from all across Germany. So in June the Mennonite Old Peoples' Home Society (Mennonitische Altersheime Verein) was formed. Hertzler and Stauffer were appointed to the Board along with Ulrich Hege representing the south German Mennonites and Dirk Cattepoel representing the north German Mennonites.

Now serious efforts to find a suitable building began. It soon became apparent that the French Zone of West Germany was the most likely spot since post-war crowding wasn't as severe there. They finally agreed to rent the 'Marienburg' in Leutesdorf near Neuwied, a fortress-like 200 year old baroque building right on the banks of the Rhine River and able to accommodate ninety residents. The preparations and alterations went forward enthusiastically and a large crowd gathered for the official opening.

CF was present and in his report of the occasion says,

The Marienburg stands there as a visible demonstration of God's kindness, and also as the evidence of the good will of men, for the German Mennonites are still poor and there are also some longstanding differences between those in the north and those in the south. Paul's exhortation to "bear one another's burdens," is what helps to make this kind of cooperation possible. This is the Law of Love, and love exists by sacrifice. It took sacrifices to bring this common work into being.

And the dear residents have long years of hard work behind them, and most of them had laid up something for their old age, but as a result of the War they were thrust out onto the street as penniless refugees. They have learned to pray along with the Psalmist:

"Do not cast me off in the time of old age; forsake me not when my strength is spent" (71:9). Unless some further catastrophe should descend upon Europe, we can trust the blessing of God will be upon this little remnant in the new home they have found. May the sunshine of God's love lighten their little rooms. And when they are outside and hear the murmuring of the Rhine, unchanged by the passage of time, let it remind them of the endless flow of God's grace and His unchanging love and faithfulness.

May God also bless the spiritual ministry in the Home so that the pure Word of truth might become a well of strength during times of testing. These times will come, even in old age, but they need not rob them of the assurance of forgiveness and sonship as they look forward to their heavenly home. (MR 29 December 49 1)

CF had a tender spot in his heart for the elderly who had been so cruelly displaced by the events of the war years. Just a few days before this he was on board ship to bid some farewell. He says, "We were overjoyed that the elderly Mrs. Helene Doerksen was finally able to go. I can still see the sad face of Mrs. Doerksen when I visited her in the hospital in Gronau, and she would ask quietly 'Is there still hope?' I kept reassuring her on the basis of our experience that she should keep trusting, that God is able. And when she reads these lines, God willing, she will be with her daughter in Coaldale, Alberta."

Two days after the dedication he was back in Gronau.

Many of these elderly ones have been waiting for a long time. The Lord keeps equipping them with patience, but it is not easy for them. I went to every room and spent some time with each one of them. They have faith in us and our efforts on their behalf, but they like to hear about it, directly, once in a while. That is understandable. Each one is dear to us and precious to the Lord. Before I left there was a little incident: the ladies came forward and surprised me with a Christmas present. I planned to open it at Christmas, but eventually broke down and did it there. It was a beautiful handmade pillowslip covered with cross stitch. That is what our dear old sisters are like; they delight in making others happy, and in the process they forget about their own distress. I was deeply moved by this experience.

On my way back to Frankfurt, driving bumper to bumper in a thick fog, I had lots of time to reflect on how much happier we would all be if we were also motivated to provide joy for our neighbor. (MR 21 December 49 1)

In providing shelter for the older generation there is little doubt that CF had caught the spirit of the fourth commandment which exhorts children of God to honor their parents in the faith. Moses was not just talking about the respect of children for parents in the nuclear family, but was addressing the larger subject of the relationship between the generations. What a blessing for a people and for a land, when God turns the hearts of

fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers.

The second home for the elderly, 'Friedenshort' (Peaceful Refuge) was opened in October 1950 and CF had the joy of attending its dedication in Enkenbach near Kaiserslautern. He traveled from Frankfurt early that morning in a thick fog, together with his friend H.H. Janzen. The sun broke out upon them as blessing from above, at 10:00 in the morning during the service. The home could accomodate 75 residents, and the house parents were his friends Heinrich and Hanna Bartel, whom he first got to know in Danzig back in 1930 at the second World Conference.

Because he was involved through all the planning stages, he was asked to address some words to the meeting. He spoke directly to the elderly using James 5:7-11 as his text,

Be patient, therefore, brethren, until the coming of the Lord. Behold, the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, being patient over it until it receives the early and the late rain. You also be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand." "We are thankful for you, especially, who have found a temporary home here. We rejoice with you. It has been a long journey. You had put a lot of hard work and effort into your homes back in Prussia. You looked forward to spending the latter years in your own homes. How differently things have turned out. Why? The Lord alone knows why you became links in a long chain of suffering. After the flight from Prussia with all its terrors, the temporary stops along the way, and the tough conditions in refugee camps, you have finally come to rest. Now you have time to reflect, in peace and quiet you can read your bibles, and get things into perspective. Like Mary, you can sit at the Lord's feet. May the Lord bless you richly, and fill you with the kind of love that gives itself as a 'living sacrifice'. May His pleasure rest upon this house, and upon all who go in and out. (MR 8 November 50 1)

Just before Christmas, on December 17th, CF was back in Enkenbach at the Old Peoples' Home to join in the celebration of the Bartel's Silver Wedding. CF really enjoyed this kind of family celebration and was delighted to be there. The Bartels were greatly appreciated as house parents and for this special celebration their children had arrived as well— all that is, but Walter their youngest, who had left for Canada a few weeks previously. He was the first to go. Later they would all follow him, and together with the parents, would settle in the Agassiz/Rosedale area of British Columbia. CF presented the couple with a beautiful edi-

tion of the Bible with their names engraved on it. The sons, Hans and Siegfried remember particularly that CF exhorted them to remember two things when they arrive in Canada: first, to remain humble and flexible in the face of all the new adjustments, and second, to continue to nourish their 'sense of family.' CF was conscious of the fact that the family in America, even among Mennonites, was under attack and stood in danger of being compromised and eroded.

Because he couldn't get home for Christmas, CF decided to spend Christmas Eve with these elderly folk at Enkenbach, Christmas Day with those at Leutesdorf, and Boxing Day (Dec 26th) with the refugees in Gronau. He had planned ahead and arranged with some Mennonite women's groups in BC and Winnipeg to make up Christmas parcels as a surprise for the old people. He took a great delight in this, and the festivities at each place were much appreciated. From the 'peaceful refuge' of Friedenshort he sent the following Christmas message to the congregations back home in Canada:

With Christmas just around the corner, we continue to hurry from one task to another, and from one tough case to another. How wonderful to know that the Lord is watching over us; how precious to be conscious of His daily presence. Today as I pen these lines the storm clouds are threatening on the political horizon in the Far East, and the 'Peace on earth' of the angels at Bethlehem seems far removed from the naked reality of our days. And yet we know that the greeting is relevant for today, especially for today. God's peace is directed toward every human heart. Do we have this peace? Have we become peacemakers? May Christ the Prince of Peace come into His own among us, in every family, every home, and every congregation. (MR 20 Dec. 50:1)

On December 6th 1952, CF participated in the dedication of the third home for the elderly at Pinneberg ('Abendfrieden') fifteen miles from Hamburg. He said, 'That the 'Mennonite Old Peoples' Home Society' has been able to establish three homes in barely four years is an accomplishment worth underlining. The German Mennonite congregations contributed generously, the MCC did its part, and last but not least, the State makes a contribution toward the support of each resident. I wish that brother Heinrich Bartel, formerly in Enkenbach and now of Agassiz BC, could

have been here. Already back in 1947 he believed firmly that such a Home could be established. Alongside the 'Marienburg' in Leutesdorf, and the 'Friedenshort' in Enkenbach, we now have 'Abendfrieden' in Pinneberg. May God bless the residents and those who care for them. (MR 27 December 1952 4-5)

'Abendfrieden' (Peace at Evening) gave expression to CF's desire that after lives filled with strife and turmoil and the 'heat of the day,' these refugees could experience God's peace in the evening of their lives.

## Housing Settlements

The other focus of CF's concern for the homeless who remained in Europe, was the work of housing settlements for families. Since 1945 and the widespread devastation that existed in the aftermath of the War, the German government had been faced with a massive housing crisis. CF reports: "In 1939 there were 10.1 million dwellings in West Germany, but 2.5 million dwellings were totally demolished during the war. In the period from 1945 to 1952, 1.4 million dwellings were created. In order to accommodate those who were bombed out, as well as the homeless refugees that had been added to the population, West Germany would need 4 million new dwellings. It's astounding that West Germany has been able to do as much as it has since the currency reform. It is into this larger scene, that our little Mennonite housing projects have played a modest part." (DM February 53)

These Mennonite housing projects occupied much of CF's attention in the early 50s. One such project was the one at Neuwied. Plans and preparations had been underway since the summer of 1950 to build a thirty house settlement just outside Neuwied at Niederbieber-Torney. CF had been involved in the discussions both in Bonn and with the local authorities and now the foundations for the first houses had been poured. This matter was greatly facilitated by the six month assignment of C.L. Graber, a businessman from Goshen Indiana, who had arrived in October 1950, to take over the business details. He had arranged for building blocks to be made out of pumice which was common

in the vicinity of Neuwied. Together with the MCC a local businessman bought a press and with MVS supplying the labor MCC got half of the blocks.

CF's first involvement with building homes for refugees began two years earlier at Espelkamp. It served them as a kind of pilot project. Espelkamp was located in a heavily wooded area between Osnabrueck and Minden in Westphalia, in north-west Germany. It was the site of a Nazi munitions factory, which hadn't been completely destroyed during the war. Refugees, including some Mennonite ones, began to gather there shortly after the close of the war and tried to make some basic repairs to the buildings to accomodate their families. It eventually became necessary to organize and to work according to an overall plan, with the thought that a city of up to 10,000 people could grow up there. Light industry was invited in to provide work for the refugees. The MCC and 'Evangelische Hilfswerk,' the relief organization of the Lutheran State church, were both involved right from the beginning.

This working together of American and German youth was highlighted in a local German paper,

One day in early May 1948, a train stopped at the little station of Espelkamp-Mittwald, a station which still had no roof and no proper building. The people that got off with their suitcases and boxes and spades, had a long journey behind them. They had come from North America. They are American Mennonites. The next day they were at the building sites standing right next to the German refugee settlers.

"You're Americans?" "Yes." "How much do you get per hour?" "Nothing." "You must get something for your work." "No." "Why are you doing it?" "For the Lord."

What sort of strange Americans, to have crossed the ocean to help German refugees and returned prisoners of war to build their homes—at their own expense. Is this what we imagined 'Amis' to be like?

These men invited us after work in the evening to the barracks where they are housed. Some of us might have gone the first time hoping for some American cigarettes or coffee. On the table lies an open bible. An hour long Bible study follows. This went on night after night and became part of the routine. During the day,

the spade; in the evenings, the Bible. Among the first pioneers of Espelkamp this became a new life-style, and it has endured to the present. It's a kind of 'Church-on-the-Job-Site.'

Except for a few of them, these American young volunteers have returned home. While here they built twenty homes for their brothers in the faith who were driven from their homes by the Russians. The Bible studies have continued on. (H. Penner WB 116).

The ones who stayed on, belonged to a Conservative Mennonite group, who continued the good work, finally building a Meeting Room where church services have continued to this day. CF was at the dedication of the building and was impressed with the good witness for Christ that was going on. To him it was another good example of how a humble beginning in relief work, can develop into mission work, finally leaving a church in its wake.

During the early months of 1951 CF was busy at Bonn getting permits, and in the banks arranging mortgages and the other financing for another housing settlement planned for Backnang, twenty miles north east of Stuttgart in south Germany. His friend, Fritz Stauffer, a banker in Ludwigshafen, was a great help to him in this regard.

Reporting on the progress of the housing work CF writes,

Our settlement projects in West Germany are progressing more slowly than we had anticipated. The first thirty houses in Neuwied were to be occupied in March, but inclement weather has held things up. The other projects in Espelkamp, Gronau, Backnang, and Frankfurt are taking shape and construction should soon begin. The financing of these settlements is difficult, especially since mortgages have become difficult to arrange in the last while. The arrival of the first team of twenty PAX men has been a great encouragement. Their help will also reduce the costs considerably. We are sorry that the CL Grabers will be returning to Goshen May 6th. Their six months with MCC in the settlement work have passed all too quickly. We will miss them sorely. (MR 2 May 51 4)

During a brief trip home to Canada in May 1951 CF reported on this aspect of his work in each of the five western provinces as well as at the MCC executive meeting.

November 9, 1952, marked a milestone for the settlement

work; the dedication of the first two of the ten projected buildings in the settlement at Backnang. Each building contained six apartments, making a total of sixty. It had been over a year ago that CF had first met with Richard Rupp, the leader of the Mennonite refugees (most of whom had come from Galicia in Poland) and with representatives of the south German Mennonites, to begin to plan this project. The financial arrangements were really complex and had taxed CF's patience to the limit, but finally they were ready to begin. Construction commenced in February 1951 with the arrival of a Mennonite Voluntary Service unit, made up of German, American, and Dutch Mennonite youth. In May the first PAX boys arrived on the scene, a presence of dedicated Mennonite young men who were to make a vital contribution to the rebuilding of postwar Europe in the next decade.

The PAX program represented a particular thrust in the American Mennonite C.O. cause at the time of the Korean War, which broke out in June 1950. At that time in America, young men of conscription age were encouraged to offer themselves for voluntary service projects even before the draft went into effect. Thus the 'PAX' program, supported and funded by the local congregations of the volunteers, was already in place and effective when young men first began to be called to serve in Korea. This PAX budget was not to undercut any other church giving and was to be over and above any other donations. Their story, which also took them to many other needy parts of the world, is told in Urie A. Bender's *Soldiers of Compassion* (Herald Press: Scottdale PA, 1969).

When the PAX boys arrived in Backnang they had to be housed at the train station hotel until the first house was completed and they could move into it. The refugees themselves, who were still in refugee barracks, arranged to help support these volunteers out of their own meagre means. All the work, except for the installation of doors and windows, was done by the PAX boys—sometimes under the supervision of a German "Meister," who marvelled at their varied abilities. CF too, was very proud of these young men, both for their building accomplishments and their Christian witness, and commended them wherever he went. Now the first two houses were ready to be dedicated.

It was a festive occasion. People had come from far and near

to rejoice together. The service was outside and began with the reading of Psalm 147, "The Lord builds up Jerusalem; He gathers the outcasts of Israel, He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds." Outcasts they were indeed, and eager to once more have a little place they could call their own.

Ulrich Hege was the main speaker and he used as his text the words of Jesus in Luke 10:5, "When you come into a house, say: peace be to this house." Selections by the PAX choir was a reminder to all that this was a united venture involving the larger brotherhood. Then CF spoke to them about the great privilege of being able to trust God. What seemed impossible two years ago, now stood there completed before them. "If we will do what we can do, God will do those things that we couldn't possibly do!" As they circled the buildings they sang hymns of gratitude and praise to God, accompanied by a south German Mennonite brass band.

### One Refugee Family

Here is the story of one of the families that moved into these newly prepared apartments. Their story is typical,

The Heinrich Warkentin family of Liebenau, Ukraine, Southwest Russia, had been fortunate in 1941 when German armies first invaded from the west. Just before the Germans arrived, a one-night evacuation order was effected by the Russians and hundreds of families separated as persons, loaded atop open freight cars, were transported to Siberia. German forces, however, gained the area before Warkentins were taken, and they were able to return to their farm.

However, in fleeing ahead of the returning Russian front in November 1943, Mr and Mrs Warkentin with two young sons plus Mrs Warkentin's mother, left their home farm and most possessions behind.

They reached a displaced persons' camp in Poland in early '44 but Heinrich was drafted into the German army later that year, leaving his family to move farther west with the mass of refugees, mostly women and children.

Overtaken by the Russian army in January of '45, Mrs Warkentin says she cannot adequately describe the suffering which

so many humans endured during 1945 and '46 in those Polish DP camps. She thought at first that they, being of German descent, would be shot by the Russians, and later almost wished it had been so when inhuman treatment, disease, and starvation worsened, claiming dozens each day.

Filth prevailed as the camps had no sanitary facilities or privacy. Women had to work on the roads with no more to eat than a bit of thin soup. Mrs Warkentin considers it a miracle that she, for one period of five weeks, had a job where a little bread could also be obtained.

Later when, against terrific protests, all children were taken away to a different camp (hers were then ages two and five), she lost all will to live and lay sick for days. She recalls another 'miracle' at that time of someone finding an old familiar hymn book which helped give her courage to go on. She also found her boys among 240 other starving youngsters and managed to get them back.

The war ended in May 1945, but Mr Warkentin was hospitalized in Germany with a wound. He heard no word about his family until January 1946, when a friend wrote that he knew of them still alive in Poland. Warkentin later heard that they would be trying to come out to Berlin with one of the large DP transport trains in December. He spent a very anxious Christmas wondering if they might have been caught by the Russians and sent back as prisoners.

When they arrived safely in Berlin in January 1947, Mrs Warkentin, the boys, and grandmother received their first assistance from MCC in the form of food, clothing, and transportation to West Germany. Life in a series of camps followed, usually together with other Mennonite refugees.

In February, Warkentin met his wife for the first time in two and a half years and later joined his family at a refugee camp in Munich.

After years in the old camp barracks at Backnang, during which time a third son was born and grandmother emigrated to Canada, the Warkentins were now finally able to move into a PAX house. Their apartment, like the others, included a living room, kitchen, bath and two bedrooms (U Bender 37-9).

It was stories like these that were a continuing burden on CF's heart and gave him the sense that no effort on the part of MCC and the wider Mennonite brotherhood was too great in the face of the challenge posed by these homeless people.

He expressed this concern in an article, ('A Home of One's Own') written in 1953, which appeared in *Der Mennonit* (Feb) and the *Rundschau* (March):

Whoever is privileged enough to live in his own home year in and year out, is able to rid himself of any debts against it, is able to make changes to suit his own tastes, enjoys family privacy, has a kitchen and stove over which mother rules, and is able to minister freely to his own children and friends without some neighbor taking offence or getting involved—that person, is probably in great danger of taking all these special privileges for granted. He is also in danger of forgetting that as a result of the War and its aftermath there are millions of families who are now homeless, families whose greatest wish is once more to have a place they can call home.

Anyone who has had the opportunity to speak to former refugees or to read their letters, and knows something of what they went through, the terrible experiences in Russia, the years of flight with all its fears and deprivations, the time of anxiously waiting for a visa, the difficult adjustments and hard work in the new world, will have some appreciation for the deep joy they experience when they once more have their own home. This is as true in South America, where the beginnings are very tough and the new home quite primitive, as it is in North America, where the beginnings are also not easy, but where the new home is much more modern. I recently had a letter from Canada from a former refugee with a large family, who tells me how happy he and his wife are now that they have a home to which their working children can return and feel welcome.

Whoever is enjoying the advantages of a home, even if it is rented, has little idea what those are going through who are deprived of this. You could say that a home is a basic prerequisite for well-ordered family life.

Sensing God's heart of mercy for the homeless, CF expresses here the driving force behind his labors down the years: to see the multitudes of war-tossed pilgrims blessed with a place of refuge at last, a home of their own. Yet he knew that he was not alone in this concern; it was shared by the wider German brotherhood who were eager to shoulder more of the responsibility of this ministry. As a leader CF had been able to mobilize and motivate many, but now he saw the need for the formation of a society to ensure the ongoing effectiveness of the work. Thus the *Mennonitische Siedlungshilfe* (Mennonite Settlement-Help) came into

being (July 53).

At its founding meeting in Ludwigshafen all eight German Mennonite Conferences and societies were represented. CF reviewed the work of the settlements built thus far. MCC through its PAX boys had contributed 2,000 DM worth of labor for each settler, which was the equivalent of the contribution the State expected from each eligible settler if the project was to qualify for State funds. And the PAX boys were doing this while paying for their own transportation and upkeep, which cost each PAX boy about \$1,800 US. CF also reminded them that between 1945 and 1952 the MCC contributed in money and goods, roughly \$6,000,000 toward the total relief effort in Germany.

As the work now passed more to the shoulders of the German brethren CF was convinced that the inter-church cooperation, facilitated by MCC, would not undermine Church-Conference structures, but would rather strengthen them. This transfer of responsibility also gave expression to an MCC goal; that works such as these could eventually be turned over to the German Mennonites minimizing the effects of 'Americanization.'

## Chapter 19

### CELEBRATIONS

*"O give thanks to the Lord, for He is good ..." (Ps 106:1).*

On December 20th, 1949, CF left Europe, completing his sixth mission to the refugees. On the 23rd he was in Winnipeg reporting on the work and visiting some of his relatives and friends there. But he reached BC by the 24th to be together with his family for Christmas on their little farm just south of Abbotsford. In the years since he had left Canada, he had spent a few Christmases away from his wife and family, at times with families who had also been separated from one another for years. Meanwhile his own children had grown up, and this was the last Christmas they were all together at home.

On this occasion they were able to spend a few happy days together. CF was also glad to meet Mary's sister Irmgard Sadikoff and her husband Peter and daughter Wera. Their son Saroja had died in combat. Mary sponsored her sister's family, and a little later her other sister Erika Kariton as well. Erika was a widow and arrived in Canada with two children in their early twenties, Inge and Werner. They had also come as refugees into West Germany and CF had been able to look them up there and help them. Her sisters still related to the Lutheran church.

When the Sadikoffs first arrived in Canada they lived together with Mary and the children. An awkward situation arose that she handled quite ingeniously and humorously. She told Cornelius that she knew they smoked, and yet she didn't want the house filled with smoke, so the first morning when they came

down for breakfast, Mary had a chocolate bar beside each plate, and said with a smile "that's your breakfast cigarette." They got the message and cooperated by only smoking outside. They were, of course, soon able to move into their own home.

CF left to report to the MCC executive committee meeting in Chicago on January 4, 1950. He was able to tell them that there were only 1,130 Russian Mennonite refugees left, and that arrangements were well under way to care for them all. From Chicago he went on to Ottawa to appeal again on behalf of his 'hard-core cases'—those who were presenting problems to the immigration process.

On January 22nd he was back at the South End Church in Winnipeg reporting on the refugee situation. It was a bitterly cold day but the church was filled to capacity. In his report CF underlined the important role of the MCC—founded thirty years earlier. "Where would we be today in our relief efforts if a start hadn't been made then? What we have done in weakness through a relatively small organization, has touched the lives of millions of people. All this was made possible by the volume of prayer that has risen up from our congregations. This is what has carried the work forward and has wrought miracles. At times, when all our efforts seemed dashed to the ground, it was renewed faith and hope and love that carried the day. Perseverance accomplished what were regarded in Europe as miracles of mercy. We were concerned to help our refugee brothers and sisters, nobody was to be overlooked or pushed aside, and impossible things have been accomplished."

Among all the things he mentioned, two things stood out and were remembered by many. The first was the story of the old, shabbily dressed refugee couple that arrived at a camp pushing a carriage containing all their earthly possessions. "Is that all you have left in this world," I asked them? "No," they said, "besides this, we still have our faith!" What a wonderful testimony. How sad, that in better circumstances, the opposite is true for some Christians—they are loaded down with the things of this world, and in the process have lost their faith.

The other thing that many remembered was the fact that on the dashboard of his car was a little verse that accompanied him on the tens of thousands of miles he drove criss-crossing Europe.

"He leads me in paths of righteousness (in German it reads 'auf rechter Strasse' – on the right street), for His name's sake" (Ps 23:3). This applied even in the two car accidents he had, through which God ministered to him as well. God disciplines every one of His children, for their good. "Shall we receive good at the hand of the Lord and not trouble?"

CF closed the meeting with these prophetic words:

The Mennonite relief work in Germany is crucial, but we will not be content with that. We are people of vision who believe that Russia will one day open its doors to the Gospel, and that church bells will once more ring out across its hills and plains. That might well bring with it challenges even greater than we have yet faced. Will we be prepared to go all the way with our help? Many practical needs are being met, but it is above all, the *spirit* of man that needs to be nourished. 'Our souls thirst for God, for the living God.' (MR 1 February 50 1)

CF was grateful to be able to return to Canada on August 24th at the close of his seventh mission to Europe to be with his family in BC, to join in the festivities as his son Walfried, 23, was married to Helen Rempel, the daughter of his good friend Abram Rempel. Rempel was the first pastor of the South Abbotsford MB church, where CF's family now attended. Rempel was also one of the founders of the Mennonite Educational Institute in 1946, the school from which CF's daughter Irmy had just graduated. Walfried had been teaching there for two years already, and Harold would also be joining the staff shortly. This was the first wedding in the family. CF was amazed at how quickly his children were growing up. He had written a long letter to his three sons from Geneva in April 1949 assuring them of his prayers and exhorting them to put God first when the subject of a life's partner would arise. He was very pleased on this occasion with his son's choice and was happy to add his blessing to the union.

A year later he was back home for the wedding of his oldest son Harold, to Ruth Thiessen, the youngest daughter of his recently deceased friend Franz C. Thiessen. And it was on this trip that he had the great joy of seeing and holding his first grandchild. He was named Cornelius Franz Klassen, after his grandfather, and was born to Walfried and Helen on July 12,

1951.

Home, in the meanwhile, had changed locations once more. With all the children at university, even the ten acre property on McCallum Road was too large. Mary was a great walker, and on one of her walks to visit a friend, she noticed an old for sale sign half hidden in the bushes. She believed the Lord had led her, and on locating the elderly pioneer who owned it, bought the two acres for \$2,000. It was a lovely spot in Clearbrook just west of Abbotsford, on top of a hill affording a beautiful view in all directions. She hired a Mennonite builder who, together with her sons, quickly erected a three bedroom bungalow. The inside finishing wasn't completed when CF arrived, but Mary had a gift at making it very 'homey,' and even with some bare two-by-fours showing they were able to host many of his friends during the next weeks.

### **Silver Wedding**

On Saturday, September 11, 1951, at the M.E.I. auditorium, just down the hill from their new place, Cornelius and Mary were able to be present at two significant events; the first was the celebration of their Silver Wedding Anniversary, and the second was a celebration of their thirty-five years of service to the wider Mennonite brotherhood. For those who are granted long years till the Golden Wedding at fifty years, a Silver Wedding is just the half-way mark. No one at CF's Silver Wedding or the gathering later that evening at the M.E.I. would have guessed that this celebration was so near to the end of his life pilgrimage.

Both occasions were times of great joy and thankfulness to God for His hand of mercy on Cornelius and Mary's life. As always CF was quick to give glory to God and acknowledgment to all his co-workers.

The Silver Wedding afforded Cornelius and Mary, the rare privilege of a family celebration. Among those who spoke were Abram H. Unruh of Winnipeg and Peter J. Dyck, CF's brother-in-law. Brother Unruh's long friendship with the couple enabled him to express the heart of their life and service—the sustaining and keeping power of God who says, "Hearken to me...all...who have been borne by me from your birth, carried from the womb;

even to your old age I am He, and to your grey hairs I will carry you. I have made, and I will bear; I will carry and I will save" (Is 46:3-4). Likening CF's life to that of an eagle he recalled the destruction of the nest in Russia and the thrusting forth onto new paths. God carried CF and his family many times during the ensuing years. He noted that CF in all his work in Russia, Canada and Europe had grown to a place of utter dependency on God and a great awareness of His steadfast love and mercy. Sensing some of the fatigue of the past twenty-five years he encouraged the couple to look to God the one who both carries and lifts his children. He exhorted them to look forward to God's power in the next twenty-five years to prove that promise "I will lift you, carry you, save you."

The prayer of dedication and blessing was a solemn moment when brother Unruh asked the congregation to rise while he himself went down and laid hands on the kneeling couple, praying for God's continued hand on them and their family. How wonderful that they could acknowledge together in the context of their Canadian brethren, the blessing God had in His mercy bestowed on the work they had been called to do. The past was clearly and gratefully delineated, the presence of their thankful family and of many refugees at the ceremony attested to divine approval on this couple. The unknown future of CF's continued service would be all too brief. But this gratifying moment served as a fitting milestone of his life motto "Gott kann." Though the path had often been hard, CF's faith in God's power to act never dimmed. He summed up their pilgrimage in the words of Psalm 23:3 "He leadeth me in paths of righteousness for His name's sake."

### **Thirty-Five Year Anniversary**

The evening of the same day saw a full gathering at the MEI to celebrate thirty-five years of ministry to his people. Ebenezer: 'hitherto the Lord has helped us' was the theme chosen for the evening. Surrounded by many whose lives had found new hope and meaning through the help of CF in Europe, it was an emotional evening for him. Peter Dyck spoke about CF's example of servanthood, of gaining the trust and confidence of those he was

serving, and of gaining credibility with those in high places whose help had often been crucial. He moved between both with the same childlike trust and faith. Dyck also reflected on CF's unique role: neither a 'preacher' nor a 'missionary,' he was widely used of God to bear witness to His master in a great variety of places and also to teach the brotherhood about service, peacemaking, the meaning of the church and the ongoing need for the education and nurture of God's people. He prayed this much needed ministry would continue to bless the brotherhood for many years to come.

It fell to B.B. Janz, chairman of the Canadian Mennonite Relief Committee, to survey the vista of thirty-five years service of CF. Quoting from Psalm 115:1 "Not to us O Lord, not us, but to thy Name give glory," he focussed on praise and thanksgiving for all the 'miracles of grace that accompanied them on their pilgrimage.'

For the sake of generations to come, he felt there was a need to draw attention to these things, by now perhaps unfamiliar to many. Since B.B. Janz's life had run parallel to CF's he was able to survey with accuracy the three major periods—Russia, Canada, and Europe. Recalling their time in prison in Russia and their respective escapes from Moscow, he thanked God for his timely deliverance for them both. Surveying the world-wide brotherhood of Mennonites he observed 'The Mennonites of the world have gone through deep times of testing: in Holland, in Russia, in France, and in Germany. Only the North American Mennonites have been spared thus far. Is our time also coming?'

B.B. Janz commented on CF's leadership during the Canadian period in conscientiously shrinking the Reiseschuld debt until everything was paid up—fit tribute to the uniting of the brotherhood around a common task. And referring to the current period of service in Europe, on 'the front lines,' he encouraged all present to continue their prayers for the refugee ministry.

Heinrich Wiebe spoke emotionally on behalf of the many new immigrants, one time refugees who had turned out for the occasion.

In 1 Thess. 5:18 it says, 'In everything give thanks.' Be thank-

ful even when our mother and father, or our children, maybe our last child, has been torn from us never to be seen again? It was not easy to give thanks 'in everything.'

We look into your eyes today and gratefully acknowledge that your gifts and prayers kept us above water, kept us alive. We stand amazed at the love of God and the help He extended to us, through you all, and through brother Klassen, in particular. We don't have silver and gold, but we do have hearts overflowing with gratitude and deep feelings of love. We love you, brother Klassen, and your family, and we pray that God will bless you and keep you. (MR 26 September 51 11)

CF was deeply moved when a love-gift of money collected from friends of his across Canada for the occasion, was given to him through brother C.A. DeFehr. Recalling the past years of his life CF spoke gratefully of God's many blessings of home and family and faith, of the trust he had received from his brothers and sisters both in Canada and back in Europe, and the privilege of being God's co-worker in the refugee ministry.

In his closing remarks he recalled the story of the couple whom he'd met,

... pushing a baby carriage loaded down with some bundles. They were Mennonite refugees. I asked them, "Is this all you've got left?" "No," they said, "we still have our faith."

Since then 12,000 refugees have come to North and South America and have found refuge. Their trust was rewarded. God granted us outstanding co-workers. I didn't do much more than pray, and believe, and push. The biggest job was done by the brethren at this end.

Through it all, one thing stood out: 'God is able!' And that's why it is not presumptuous to close with this quote from Paul: "For I am sure, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord!" (Rom 8:37-39). In this confidence I would like to continue my service, as long as the Lord and the churches would like me to. I would also like to thank you for the love and kindness you have shown me today, and especially for the gift. I would also like to testify today that I would not have been able to carry out my service without the help of my wife and children. I am not worthy of all this love. It humbles me, that God has let me see this day. (MR 26 September 51 3,6)

Closing the event was Elder Heinrich Epp, pastor of the West

Abbotsford church (father of author Frank Epp), who drew the assembly's attention once again to God's grace: "Isn't it wonderful what the grace of God can do with a man."

With this series of celebrations completed, the pull to return to Europe was strong again.

CF was essentially a family man. As has been shown, the separation from loved ones for the sake of his work in Europe was never easy for him. Mary had been strong and faithful on the home front and this had somewhat eased his burden. J.B. Toews has commented that CF could never have done the work he did, had it not been for the wife God gave him.

Yet now the major task of raising the family would soon be over. Where was 'home' for CF and Mary? His sense of belonging to the refugees and the German brethren was strong. Yet Mary was his wife and her bond with Canada was equally strong. Would God finally make it possible for them to work side by side again as they had in Moscow many years previously? Or could they return to Canada laying aside the bonding of relationships that had become so precious to CF in the post-war years?

These questions were in CF's heart as he returned to Europe on November 30, 1951. The family discussions didn't seem to resolve anything. But the future was in God's hands.

## Chapter 20

# UNITING THE WIDER MENNONTIE BROTHERHOOD

*"That they may all be one..." (Jn 17:21).*

During the years of CF's service in Europe one role that caused him to become a familiar figure to Americans and Europeans alike was his liaison work between MCC and the German, Swiss, French and Dutch Mennonites. A close working relationship was essential if all the relief and service efforts of the wider Mennonite Brotherhood could have maximum effectiveness. Having lived in Canada for fifteen years as a German-speaking Russian Mennonite CF was able to relate to both groups. And since his first coming to Germany in 1945 he had had a deep interest in the spiritual life of the European brethren. As we've seen, it involved him with Harold Bender in the first 'Glaubenskonferenz' in Basel in 1947.

The third Conference in Basel was in August 1949 and CF was glad to be a part of it. The attendance had doubled from the first conference to the second, and now it jumped to over seven hundred, with the meetings being held in the large new Reformed Church—the 'Johanneskirche.' The Mennonite congregations in Basel still handled the billeting and feeding. Among the seventeen speakers was Harold Bender speaking on "Faith, Love and the Cross: the Testimony of our Anabaptist Forefathers," and CF

Klassen speaking on "The Homeless Find a Homeland.' The overall theme for the conference was Discipleship; following Jesus.

## **MCC Study Mission**

In August of 1950 a crucial series of meetings was held which again drew on CF's five years' of working experience in the European context—the MCC Study Mission. It began July 29th in Frankfurt with a series of meetings, and moved on to Holland and France spending a few days in each, and then ended up in Basel where they would also take in the fourth Basel Glaubenskonferenz together.

The MCC was represented by Harold Bender, Orie Miller, and Henry Fast from America, and C.F. Klassen, Paul Peachey, and Harold Buller from Europe. AE Kreider represented the General Conference Mennonites, H.H. Janzen the Mennonite Brethren, John Moseman the (Old) Mennonites, and C.N. Hosteter the Brethren in Christ. The German Mennonites were represented by men like Benjamin Unruh, Emil Heandiges, Richard Hertzler, Otto Schowlater and others.

At the Frankfurt meeting it was agreed:

- 1) that the MCC would continue with its responsibility for the work in Vienna,
- 2) that the work in Berlin should come under the German Mennonites,
- 3) that the American Mennonites working at Espelkamp should be encouraged to stay and build a church there,
- 4) that Emden's appeal for help in rebuilding their war-damaged church should be taken up, and
- 5) that a Continuing Commission should be chosen to oversee developments affecting the German Mennonites unitedly. CF was chosen to be on this Commission, and was subsequently chosen by the members to be its chairman. One of the major concerns of this Commission would be the continuing welfare of the Danzig refugees in Germany, both physically and spiritually. Other matters would include the Mennonite community center in Berlin, the Mennonite high school at Weierhof etc.

At the meeting of the MCC Study Mission with the French

Mennonites, CF is remembered particularly because, when the French Mennonites said they would have to close down the MCC children's home at Valdoie, CF opposed it saying, "You can administer the home yourself; you can keep it going even without MCC help. You don't know what you are capable of, until you try." They took up his challenge, and are operating it as a children's home and conference center to this day. The fourth Basel 'Glaubenskonferenz' was a fitting climax to the Study Mission. It was hailed as a mini- Mennonite World Conference.

CF had been commissioned to lead the conference, assisted by Fritz Goldschmidt from Basel. The three-fold theme of the Conference was "Conversion— Service— Return of Christ," according to the text: "...(1) *your faith* in God has gone forth everywhere ... how you turned to God from idols, (2) *to serve* a living God, and (3) *to wait* for His Son from Heaven...." (1 Thess 1:8, 10).

Bender, among others, spoke on the theme of Conversion, Pierre Widmer from France, among others, on the theme of Service, and Cornelius Wall on the theme of the Return of Christ. Orie Miller and C.F. Klassen illustrated the theme of Service with examples from the MCC story past and present. CF summarized the sessions in these words, "The speakers made it very clear that only those who have experienced a true new birth, can have assurance of salvation, can serve the Lord acceptably, and can truly watch and pray for the Lord's return. The Lord will certainly bless this witness to his Name." (DM September 50 97)

### **European Mennonite Bible School**

Another concern on CF's heart was the spiritual nurture of those in Europe whose faith had been so tried and tested by the war experience. As a response to this need the European Mennonite Bible School was opened in Basel on November 12, 1950. What Bender and Klassen had first dreamed about back in 1947, and had first spoken about openly at the first Glaubenskonferenz that year, was now a reality. It was just seven months before on March 20 at the MCC center in Basel that a general meeting had been called in order to take some practical steps. It became clear that there was a growing interest among the Swiss, French and

German Mennonites, and that the main obstacles were the practical ones. At that point in the meeting CF spoke up:

I can't imagine our Canadian churches without their Bible schools. This is where our youth are receiving the systematic biblical instruction that is making a real difference in the life of our congregations. On behalf of the MCC I would propose that if there are about twenty five young people willing to take a six to eight weeks course, the MCC will offer its Basel premises at no cost as the locale. In order to reimburse the teachers, however, and to provide necessary materials and food, every student would be expected to pay about 200 Swiss francs. And if a student should not be able to pay, the MCC would cover for him. When the bible schools in Canada began, the initiative usually came from a smaller dedicated group or society. It was only later that the denominations stepped in. We are on the right track, let's proceed in faith. (Minutes 2)

Fritz Goldschmidt thanked the MCC for its generous offer and it was agreed that they would move forward. A committee was chosen with a representative from Switzerland, Samuel Gerber; one from the Alsace, Hans Nussbaumer; one from France, Pierre Widmer; and one from Germany, Christian Schnebele. CF was asked to attend their meetings whenever possible.

This was a brand new undertaking for the European Mennonites and there was considerable anxiety as to how it would turn out. Applications came in slowly, but on opening day there were twenty seven, and they came from all the areas represented, plus a good representation from among the refugees. The teaching staff consisted of Samuel Gerber, Pierre Widmer, Christian Schnebele, Paul Peachey, and H.H. Janzen.

As it turned out, in its first season, the school just ran for four weeks, from November 12 to December 10, but it was generally agreed that it was a great success. The testimonies of the students and teachers at the closing exercises confirmed this, as did the testimonies of the churches that the school visited, and the congregations to which the students returned.

## **Church Renewal Meetings**

From June 28 to July 1 CF was at an historic retreat at the Thomashof. It was called together by the Continuing Commis-

sion of which he was the chairman, and was the first time ever that German Mennonite ministers from all the different groups and conferences in Germany met together. The Mennonite young people who had previously taken up the challenge of non-resistance, were now objecting to the young age at which baptisms traditionally happened in the Mennonite churches in Germany. So the theme chosen for the conference was the new birth as it relates to baptism and the nature and mission of the church congregation.

This was another instance where Klassen and Bender linked together to give of themselves for the spiritual renewal of their Mennonite brothers and the congregations they represented. As Bender approached the theme by way of the Anabaptists, it was clear he spoke with spiritual authority, and participants testified later that at that point in the proceedings it was no longer a matter of talking 'about' our churches, but a matter of wrestling in the spirit 'for' them. Pastors saw more clearly the need for the Holy Spirit to baptize men and women into the Body of Christ, and they cried to God for a restoration of this reality among them. Conversion and discipleship it was agreed, bring a visible body of believers into being, not an invisible mixed multitude.

CF as chairman spoke at the concluding service on Saturday night. His spirit bore witness to the fact that they had all been drawn closer to the Lord in the past three days, and that such fellowship with the Lord leads inevitably to a closer fellowship with one another in the body of Christ, which transcends Conference and regional barriers. O how we need the power of the testimony that went forth from our Anabaptist forefathers! In our weakness we could wish God would send angels to accomplish His purposes on earth, but He chooses to work through imperfect vessels who are made clean by the blood of the Lamb and are empowered by the Holy Spirit.

His concluding text was Psalm 62:11-12 "Once God has spoken; twice have I heard this: *that power belongs to God*; and that to thee, O Lord, belongs steadfast love."

"This too, is our confession, that the power to walk in these things we have discussed, belongs to God" (DM August 51).

For CF the early fifties were years of increasing involvement in the life of the European Mennonites. His wholehearted iden-

tification with their spiritual development was absorbing his time and energies. This represented the call of God upon his life in his final years. There was no 'official' reason why he should attend all the conferences of the north German 'Vereinigung' or the south German 'Verband' or the ministers and elders meetings and their various committees and boards— yet he hardly missed one of them. Nor was there any 'official' reason why they should want to have him— although they acknowledged openly how much they appreciated his vision and concern. He wasn't working with the refugees in a vacuum, but in the context of the life of the European Mennonite brotherhood.

Otto Schowalter, pastor of the Mennonite Church in Hamburg, traced this role of CF's back to the fall of 1945,

CF was the first one to break through the wall of hatred that surrounded Germany at the end of the war. And in the following years he was the one who took our Dutch brotherhood by one hand—I think I can dare to say it now—and the German/Prussian brethren by the other hand, and led them together, painful as it was. These are historic facts. (DM June 54 85)

Not that he was conscious of this, but there is no doubt that the inner uprootedness and spiritual plight of the German Mennonites were particularly close to CF's heart. He knew that when the basic needs for food and clothing were satisfied, the deeper needs of the inner well-being of individuals and churches would still be there. He did what he could himself, and he also made every effort to draw in other men of God as well, men such as H.H. Janzen, Cornelius Wall, J.J. Thiessen and many others, to minister not only to the refugees but also in the Mennonite churches. We have already seen how the 'Faith Conferences' in Basel played into this, as did the European Mennonite Bible School. Also meaningful was his role as co-editor (1948-1951 with Harold Bender) and later editor (1952-1954), of the MCC journal *Der Mennonit*, as part of this identification. His leading role at the fifth Mennonite World Conference which would be meeting in Basel in August 1952 represents a high point along this line.

A word should be said about the vision behind *Der Mennonit*. It was a very ambitious and comprehensive vision: to unite German-speaking Mennonitism around the world, including the

three waves of refugees from Russia, in the 1870s, the 1920s and 1940s. These Mennonites were now in four major cultural settings: 1) The original Mennonites who had never left the Rhine basin, 2) The Mennonites who resettled in Germany in several waves, 3) The Mennonites in North America, and 4) The Mennonites in South America. In some ways it was a hopeless vision, since each area had its own papers and journals and unique development. But in some ways it was a beautiful vision, and was masterfully carried on after CF by Peter J Dyck and others. There's no doubt that for a time *Der Mennonit* did unite Mennonites from around the world and did bolster their spiritual focus.

Shortly after returning to Europe on November 30, 1951, CF was up in Hamburg at a meeting to arrange for a more effective ministry to the spiritual needs of the Mennonites in the north German 'diaspora.' Hundreds of Prussian Mennonite refugees were still scattered far and wide with little possibility of attending church services. It was agreed at this December 10-11 meeting to divide up the region into eleven areas with itinerant ministers serving in each area. Otto Schowalter says of that meeting "When the spiritual ministry to the scattered sheep was finally established in December 1951, CF was right there amongst us. He was a man of hope and that is why he found his way into those circles where hope was flagging, where people weren't sure which way to turn. He not only stirred up hope and courage amongst us, but tried to help us Germans get our feet into the stirrup and hoist us up, so that we would take hold of the responsibilities he had already seen in advance." (DM June 1954 85)

### **Fifth Mennonite World Conference**

As the spring of 1952 turned into summer CF turned his attention to the preparations for the fifth Mennonite World Conference, which convened in St. Crischona, just outside Basel, August 10-15. CF was on the Preparatory Commission along with fourteen other representatives from all over the world. He was also on the five member Executive Committee, along with Harold Bender, who was the chairman. The other three were

Meihuizen from Holland, Ulrich Hege from Germany, and Hans Nussbaumer from France. The theme they agreed on for the Conference was 'The Church of Jesus Christ and its Task.' Bender's special burden was the renewal of the Mennonite churches. CF's concern was that the Mennonite church acknowledge the needs of its refugees as one of its urgent tasks.

The weeks just before the Conference were very busy ones for CF. Many of the delegates, particularly those from America, had arranged to come earlier and wanted to see the refugee camp at Gronau, the refugee settlements at Neuwied and Backnang etc., and the old folks homes at Leutesdorf and Enkenbach. As 'ambassador' for the refugees he was their advocate and was kept on the run showing delegates around and soliciting their support.

At the convention itself, the Wednesday evening session was dedicated to 'Our Refugees,' and PC Hiebert, chairman of the MCC since its inception in 1920, presided. CF delivered the main address on "Our Refugee Work: Past, Present, and Future," and was followed by J.J. Thiessen speaking on "The Settlement of our Refugees in Canada." In his talk CF raised the question of who carries the responsibility for the refugees. At the meeting for delegates, Ulrich Hege said that the German delegates were deeply moved by CF's challenge and were dedicating themselves unitedly to shoulder the refugee burden. He then recommended that this be extended, and the delegates rose as a man and agreed unanimously that the responsibility for Mennonite refugees in Germany, their spiritual welfare, their emigration and their settling in Germany, is the responsibility of our total Mennonite brotherhood. This was a very gratifying moment for CF. His selfless dedication to the task and his pleading of their cause had not been in vain. The weeks right after the conference were also filled with public relations work for the refugee cause.

One of the highlights of the conference, that he underlined afterwards repeatedly, was the fact that just before his talk, he was able to introduce to the assembly two of his close friends and associates, one from Russia, Peter Froese, and one from Canada, T.O.F. Herzer.

In introducing Herzer, CF reminded the conference guests that for forty years Herzer had worked for the CPR's colonization association and during that time he had been able to help many

a Mennonite immigrant get established in Canada. But more recently he has been the chairman of the Canadian Christian Council for the Resettlement of Refugees, a joint effort of Lutherans, Baptists and Mennonites, that has brought a total of 20,000 German refugees out of Germany and Austria to Canada. Truly a great work of mercy that God has richly blessed.

CF introduced Peter Froese as a brother who had spent many years in Russian prisons for his faith. The conference welcomed him as one who represented those many others who have been imprisoned and have suffered for Christ's sake. It was because Froese tried to help the Mennonite refugees that gathered in Moscow in 1929, that he was imprisoned for eleven years. What he endured in those years defies description, and it was a miracle that he was able to elude the secret police in 1941 and escape to Germany in 1945. He then addressed the conference briefly with these words,

It is a most remarkable experience to stand before you today. It was in January 1925 that the All-Russian Mennonite Congress gathered in Moscow. I wasn't involved directly in the proceedings, but I had to clear the way for the Congress with the authorities. To our amazement, permission was granted. That Congress then chose a delegate to represent the Russian Mennonites at the first Mennonite World Conference meeting in Basel later that year—but he never got there because the Swiss denied him the entrance visa. And yet, here I am, at the fifth Mennonite World Conference, and able to direct these few words to you. How amazing God's leadings are!

It hasn't been known that clearly in the West, that when the emigrants gathered in Moscow in 1929, 400 Mennonites were arrested, and I was the first. Most of them are probably no longer alive. And why didn't they shoot me at that time? One reason was the strong interest demonstrated by the second Mennonite World Conference, meeting in Danzig in 1930. Another reason was the help that Germany offered, especially through its representative Professor Auhagen.

My case came up six times in Moscow, but never was I allowed to be present. When in October 1937 they gave me a piece of paper saying my sentence had been extended for another five years, I went on a hunger strike. They threw me into an iron cage, and I had to face the fact that to continue my strike would mean certain death. Is it right to die like this and shorten my suffering? This is the question I wrestled with. Politically speaking, death by hunger strike isn't considered suicide, but spiritually speaking we

must drink the cup that is given us, to the end. I broke my fast, and a wonderful peace came into my heart—it was almost like a state of ecstasy—in that cold cell. It became crystal clear: you must walk the path of suffering that God has prescribed for you, to the end. My experience was like Elijah's under the juniper tree: he wanted to die, but an angel came and woke him and said, stand up, drink, and eat, for you have a long way before you. My path too, has been long and difficult; but today, I am here at this World Conference!

I can't close, without reminding you of those who are still there: some dead, some alive. Yes, many have died, but many are still alive, and under cruel circumstances. But, my brothers and sisters, in a most amazing way I've been saved, and our great God and Father can save many more out of their bondage (Proc 262-3).

CF was eager that his brothers and sisters representing our whole brotherhood should hear these words directly from one who carried in his body the marks of his sufferings for Christ. This theme of costly discipleship, was further strengthened when, on the last day of the conference, they all traveled to Zurich, where a service was held on the banks of the Limmat River, to commemorate the death 425 years earlier, of Felix Mantz, the first Anabaptist martyr. When he was being taken out to the middle of the River, his mother called out to him from the shore, "remain steadfast, my son." In his spirit, CF could hear thousands of our suffering brothers and sisters crying, "Pray for us, that our faith fail not."

For CF, Peter Froese was a representative of all those 'silent ones' who had not been able to escape from Russia. Writing on this in *Der Mennonit* (Oct 53) he reflects that for those who had gained their freedom, the exodus was clearly a miracle and he was the first to encourage them to acknowledge this. "Let's be humble enough and wise enough to admit it. That our Father in heaven, who has everything at His command, didn't use angels but simply fallible humans as His instruments, is also a miracle.... We have not yet forgotten the miracle of our deliverance from the Soviet State. Or have we?"

But CF was exercised about the responsibility the liberated brethren had to those who had stayed behind:

What about those who remained there, who we can't help in any way, other than through faithful intercession? What about their oppressors? Do we receive grace from God so that there is no room in our hearts for hatred against them? Or can we take even more grace, so that we can pray for our enemies as Christians should, for those that Satan has blinded? We can barely imagine the spiritual and physical suffering and manifold tribulations that our brethren and millions of others have to go through. One thing is certain, however, that many of them have learned what it means to be able to say with the apostle, "No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us." (Rom 8:37)

One mother wrote years ago from Siberia, from her pitiful surroundings, how her husband along with others was being forced further north, leaving her and their two daughters without any support. They never heard anything from him again. Not long afterwards the oldest daughter came down with typhus and died. The mother and youngest daughter buried her there. The mother made a simple wooden cross to mark the spot, and wrote on it in pencil with a shaky hand "Und Jesus bleibt doch Sieger" (And Jesus is nevertheless Victor). Soon after that the mother died, and God alone knows what became of the other daughter.

We want to be more faithful in our prayers for them! (DM October 53)

The concern for the 'Silent Ones' was a heavy burden on CF's heart that he would carry with him to the grave. In his life he saw the fulfillment of many tasks and goals. Yet there is an incompleteness to life, and it is fitting that one part of the legacy he leaves to us and succeeding generations should contain within it an invitation: the call to carry that burden on our own hearts till it too be fulfilled—the burden to minister to his brethren back in Russia. With the passing of the years, and the tides of history those with whom he shared his life are long since gone; scattered to Siberia, to Germany, to North and South America and many other parts of the earth. Yet the seed of some of those who were put to death still lives on. Some of them lost their faith, while in others, miraculously, it was preserved.

CF's hope and dream that one day church bells would again ring out in Russia was partially fulfilled a generation later in 1988 when that country celebrated the millennium of Christianity (988-1988). And in 1989 many were present in Karaganda and Chortitza for the Anniversary of the advent of the Mennonites to Russia in 1789. Even more significant was the ringing of bells in Mos-

cow on New Years' day 1990, bells in Red Square, marking the turn in the tide of a new attitude towards religious freedom. While there is much repression still in communist lands there are many heartening signs of the presence of a vibrant faith in Russia. Already many contacts are being renewed, families being reunited both in Europe and North America. Though the gates are not yet wide open, they are open enough that many of our leaders have in recent years made fruitful and rewarding trips back to the land of their forefathers. But this is taking us beyond our story. As CF passed the torch on to succeeding generations, he like Moses saw God's promises afar. May his faith be satisfied in this generation as they in turn seek to serve God in their times.

## Chapter 21

### THE LAST YEAR

*"My times are in your hand ..." (Ps 31:15).*

When Cornelius returned to America in March 1953, Mary was in Montreal to meet him. After his sixteen month absence they were eager to spend as much time as possible together. After two days in Montreal with his brother John and his wife Olga, they traveled to Akron, Pennsylvania, where Mary was able to visit the MCC international headquarters for the first time, and where they were able to visit in the home of Orie Miller. From Akron they traveled on to Chicago for the MCC executive committee meetings. After reporting on the progress of the housing developments the committee commissioned him to travel through Mennonite communities in Canada and the US raising funds for the Settlements.

From Chicago their journey took them to Winnipeg, where they joined their two youngest children, who were completing a year of study at the Mennonite Brethren Bible College. Mary had rented a small home in Elmwood near to the College and it was here that CF spent some time flat on his back recovering from acute exhaustion enjoying the rare privilege of being cared for by his wife in their little home away from home.

This last visit home had an especial significance in his pilgrimage—a kind of spiritual milestone. Though to many he seemed as full of energy and vitality as ever, he began to sense some warning signs that his life pace was exacting much from his physical resources. In a brief greeting published in the *Men-*

*nonitische Rundschau*(1 Apr. 1953:4) he quotes Psalm 31:15 "My times are in your hands." The report was entitled 'Home Again.' At such times of rest and reflection—so rare for this busy servant, his thoughts must have begun to contemplate the eternal home to which he was traveling. Many relatives, co-workers and friends both from Russia and later years had already gone before.

In spite of a life dedicated to ministry to his fellow men, CF had the privilege of a home and family to return to from the midst of his work from time to time. Already his sons were establishing homes of their own and Mary was already feeling that the large house where they had lived as a family was too big. Yet as he lay on his back in those days of March 1953 CF's thoughts were not of his own home. He was thinking about the trip he was to make during the ensuing ten weeks to fifty three communities in Canada and the US on behalf of MCC to appeal for help for those in Europe who were yet homeless. His article 'A Home of One's Own' had appeared in *Der Mennonit* in February and was reprinted in the *Mennonitische Rundschau* in March. It concluded with a plea for help. MCC reported later that as a result of that trip \$25,000 flowed into the fund for rehousing the homeless.

### Last Speaking Tour

By Sunday afternoon March 26 he was well enough to give a public report at the South End Church. He was asked to speak again on the theme of 'Homes for the Homeless' and the response was very heartening.

After having renewed friendships with relatives and friends in Winnipeg, they traveled on to Saskatoon for another meeting, and then on to Coaldale, Alberta. While in BC he spoke at a number of churches, and then took great delight in taking Mary and the family out to Agassiz to visit the former refugees Heinrich and Hanna Bartel and their children. They were once again dairy farmers as they had been back in West Prussia, and were happily involved in the local Mennonite church. The bond between CF and this family ran very deep. One manifestation of this was the fact that Siegfried Bartel, inspired by the role MCC had played in

the renewal and relocation of their own family, became the chairman of MCC/BC, and carried the torch for many years.

It was agreed that Mary would stay home now and he would carry through with the rest of the speaking tour on his own. It took him back across the prairies and through Ontario. From there he moved into the eastern and central States. This meant he would have to report in English, which he was always self-conscious about. He needn't have been. The attendance was large and the response was enthusiastic. He was particularly pleased with the warm response among the Amish. With their permission he tried his German on them, but it was so far removed from their Pennsylvania Dutch that they finally had to admit they weren't following him, and he had to revert to English. The meetings in Indiana, Illinois and Iowa went particularly well. Once he got to Kansas and Nebraska and further West, he said they rushed him so much that he felt he really didn't get to know them well enough and couldn't feel their spiritual pulse.

This was the most extensive speaking tour he had ever undertaken, and he was gratified by the good response and strong interest. He was grateful too to God for providing the health and strength so that he could complete what he had undertaken.

It was during this brief few months in North America that Cornelius and Mary agreed that the time had come when they could be together in the ministry again. The youngest two children were already college students and Mary was freer to participate in some of the activities and meetings that made up CF's life. While at home all the necessary plans were made for them to join him in Frankfurt in late summer. Once he got there in June, he tried to make arrangements for their accommodation. It was no easy matter to acquire another room at Schlosserstrasse 3 from the US military for their use, but he was not the type to take 'no' for an answer, and permission was finally granted. After almost nine years he says he could hardly wait for their arrival.

## **Summer Bible School Materials**

While preparing for their arrival there were continuing matters needing attention. One of these was the need to foster

cooperation between the French, Swiss and German Mennonites in the translation of English Summer Bible School materials into German and French. MCC took the initiative, and CF was one of its strongest advocates. The preparation of the materials was focussed in Basel where Hilda Carper from America, along with Dora Lichti from Germany and Anne Comptesse from France did the translating and preparing. Summer Bible schools with the children began already on a small scale in 1951, mostly with Mennonite children, including the children of refugees. It was in the doing of it, that the need for better materials became apparent. The work was strengthened too by graduates of the European Mennonite Bible School who had been encouraged to serve the Lord and the church in this way.

CF was at an important meeting in Basel on July 2, 1953 where representatives from Switzerland, Germany, France, and America agreed to forge ahead with this work. AJ Metzler, from the Mennonite Publishing House in Scottdale Pennsylvania was there and agreed that they would publish the materials— which turned out to be more of a sacrifice than a business venture. CF wrote up the work in an article for *Der Mennonit* under the heading "Mennonite Summer Bible Schools in Europe." His enthusiasm shines through. Summer Bible Schools for children were an important arm of the church in North America, and in his mind's eye he could see hundreds of youth now reaching out to the needy children of Europe, and "when the day comes, and the Iron Curtain is no longer there, we will be ready to take the good news of the Cross to the children farther east whose minds have for so long been nourished on anti-Christian poison." (DM September 1953 134)

This work with children, he believed, was also one way to help keep the missions drive alive in Mennonite congregations. Present at the meeting were Cornelius Wall, principal of the European Mennonite Bible School, Samuel Gerber, a Swiss leader and teacher who later became the principal, John Howard Yoder, serving with MCC at the Valdoie children's home and also a teacher at EMB School, Andre Goll, French Mennonite teacher, Theo Glueck, youth leader from South Germany, and the three translators mentioned above.

In mid-August CF was at his last 'Basler Glaubens-

konferenz,' which had as its theme "You Shall be My Witnesses." The list of speakers from all over the brotherhood was again an impressive one, and there is no doubt that the thrust of this Conference was echoed in some of his last writings— as will be seen. The planning committee, of which CF was a member, had asked him to speak at the concluding session.

### **His Family Joins Him**

Uppermost on CF's mind during the last days of August was his sense of anticipation at the thought of the arrival of his wife and the two children. Finally he would be able to share with Mary some of his joys in the work and some of his close friendships. She and the children left Winnipeg on August 25 by train, and August 28 left Montreal by the CPR ship 'Empress of Scotland,' arriving in Liverpool on September 4th.

CF was in the Hoek van Holland in good time on Saturday afternoon September 5 to meet them. It was a happy beginning for the last chapter of his life— and he took great delight in being their European host. He drove them through Rotterdam, and showed them some of the sights in Amsterdam, including the 'Singelkerk,' the Mennonite church on the Singel that dates back to 1608.

After spending the night in Apeldoorn, he took them to Gronau, where he wanted them to see where the refugee camp had been, and where he had expended so much of his energy for the thousands of his brethren who had passed that way. From there they traveled over Duesseldorf and Koeln to Bonn. Here he showed them the West German government buildings where he had done so much of the negotiating for land for the refugee settlements. Now they followed the Rhein past Neuwied and Koblenz all the way to Mainz. From there it was just a short drive on the Autobahn to Frankfurt. Mary had written literally thousands of letters over the years to Schlosserstrasse 3, and now she would finally be able to see the place, and help to turn it from an office and bedroom, into a home where cooking and eating would now go on, and piano practicing and singing. The initial plan was that their daughter would study music in Frankfurt and their son

would study theology in Basel.

Although CF was very much a family man, and a very committed father, during the past nine years his family had been deprived of his presence. Being together again for the last nine months of his life was a great joy for the four of them. Yet it would only be fair to acknowledge that the absence of a father in their formative years had been acutely felt by the children, particularly Irmy, and had left scars that only the grace of God could heal. But for now such burdens were eclipsed by their joy in being together, and seeing so much evidence of CF's ministry among the fatherless and widows in Europe.

The next day the first round of introductions began. CF was proud of his wife, and wanted his co-workers and associates to meet her. He was also proud of his co-workers and friends and wanted Mary to meet them and become their friend as well. The first stop was at the Frankfurt MCC center at 44 Vogtstrasse. The Cornelius Walls were living there until the Bible School session would begin December 6. The Walls spent much of their time speaking at North German Mennonite youth retreats, and were greatly appreciated. John Hostetler, MCC accountant was also there, Dorothy Swartzendruber, the secretary, Curtis Janzen, with MVS, and Junior Lehman, in charge of MCC vehicles. The Frankfurt Mennonite congregation, under Richard Wagner's leadership also met at the center on Sundays and the youth during the week.

For supper they were at the Kemnitzers, an elderly couple from West Prussia that CF had befriended, and whose daughter Helga he had helped to get to Bethel College in North Newton Kansas as an exchange student.

The next day they went to Kronberg, just north of Frankfurt, to meet Hertha Melchers, a war-widow who worked as a physiotherapist to take care of her twelve year old daughter and 78 year old mother. When CF first met her she needed medication urgently for her ailing mother and it was only available through her brother in Holland. In his many travels CF was able on occasion to bring it back for her. A warm friendship between the two families developed that later brought Hertha to Canada on a return visit.

Two days later they were at the Batzenhof for Mary to meet

the Benjamin Unruhs and the Johannes Hodels. Mary had last seen Benjamin back in 1928 when she was fleeing Russia.

From there it was on to Backnang to see the 'Siedlung' and to meet the Richard Rupps. After a two day break they traveled up along the Rhine to see the Housing project at Neuwied and to meet the C.N. Hieberts in the little MB church. It will be remembered that C.N. Hiebert led Mary closer to the Lord back in 1935 and baptized her. He was still full of spiritual vigor winning souls to the Lord on the back streets of Neuwied and pastoring a little flock of converts. When they got back to Frankfurt from this excursion, they were delighted to get a phone call from their son Harold announcing the birth of their first child, Irene. It was Cornelius and Mary's third grandchild, but first grand daughter (now with MCC in Africa).

Two days later on September 19 they traveled up to Goettlingen to meet Ernst and Rosa Crous, the friendly librarian and scholar, and on to Hamburg to meet the Otto Schowalter family, and finally to Luebeck for the dedication of the first six houses in that new settlement. CF and Otto Schowalter officiated at the ceremony. CF had arranged through the MCC that every family moving in would receive the wall plaque: 'Christ is the Lord of this home, the unseen guest at every meal, and the silent participant in every conversation.' From Luebeck they motored back to Bremen to meet the MCC staff, and to stay the night.

After a few days in Frankfurt Cornelius and Mary traveled down to Stuttgart for a visit with their old friend Peter Froese. Mary was delighted to see Peter again, although very sorry that he had no news now for many years from his wife and three children. What a heart-break on top of all the physical suffering that he had endured in the slave-labor camps. Some of his past he was willing to share, but some of it was too painful. The fellowship was warm and many old memories of Moscow and the Menno center came flooding back. Except for visits from Cornelius, he led a pretty lonely existence. Much of his time he spent revising the book he had written on his experiences under the Soviet dictatorship. CF was able to arrange some speaking engagements for him in circles where serious research on Russia was being pursued. It was in the early morning hours that Cornelius and Mary got back to Schlosserstrasse 3 in Frankfurt.

One opportunity for Mary to become acquainted with the breadth of the work with which he was involved both in MCC and the wider circles of European Mennonites, was a retreat for all the European MCC workers at Bad Boll October 3-6. About 140 workers came together from all over Germany and Austria, as well as from Switzerland, France, Holland, and even as far away as Greece. And the work they were involved in was as varied as the countries they came from: children's homes, community centers, settlement construction, youth work, food and clothing distribution, refugee emigration, voluntary service camps etc. It was a great opportunity for Mary to meet the larger MCC family ministering in Europe.

She continued to be at his side during the activities that filled the closing months of 1953 in Alsace and Basel, in meetings with Hans Nussbaumer and the Bible School workers, and in Enkenbach at the dedication of the first settlement houses.

They were in Basel for the opening of the fourth annual session of the European Mennonite Bible School on December 6, 1953. This school, later located at Blaenenberg, was high on CF's priority list. He was convinced that it would contribute directly to the spiritual renewal of the European Mennonite churches. Hans Nussbaumer and CF each spoke at the opening, and each of the teachers also gave a brief word: Christian Schnebele from Germany, Willy Peterschmidt from France, John Howard Yoder from America and with MCC in France, David Shank with Mennonite Mission Board in Belgium, and Cornelius Wall from the US and now the principal of the school.

Sharing his vision for the school CF said,

This is no school for pastors, but a school where our young people are immersed into the sacred writings, and where they discover how important Christian ethics are for personal life and the building of the congregation. It is a school where the students learn from general church history and from Mennonite history how God's blessing has rested on those who were not ashamed to testify of their Lord and were faithful unto death. A school too where students learn to minister biblical truths to children in the church, and beyond the confines of the church. They also experience what the priesthood of all believers is, and how they can accept responsibility for the spiritual growth and development of the congregations from which they come. (DM September 53)

Just before Christmas CF's heart acted up and he had to see a doctor and spend a few days in bed. Mary was happy to be there with him, but she shared the anxiety he felt when the irregularity of his heart and the weakness it brought with it laid him low. The four of them spent a quiet Christmas at Schlosserstrasse 3, and were able to take in the Christmas Eve service with the Melchers in Kronberg and the Christmas Day service with his good friend Pfarrer Gottwaldt at the Nord-Ost Gemeinde, an evangelical Lutheran church.

Right after Christmas, Cornelius and Mary spent some quiet days together while the children were at a North German youth retreat near Hamburg. As 1953 came to a close CF had become more acutely aware of his failing strength. Yet he looked forward to the challenge of the New Year, encouraging himself to 'press on despite everything'. Writing on this theme in *Der Mennonit* he quotes Paul from 2 Tim 1:7,

"For God did not give us a spirit of timidity (fear, cowardice, despair), but a spirit of power and love and self-control (wise discretion, sound mind.)"

Advent and Christmas are just past. We have been impressed again with the fact that the 'Word became flesh and dwelt among us'; impressed even more with the glory of this One who came as a man. We've become more conscious too, that our first responsibility as Christians is not only to tell others about our Lord, but to show them with our lives what He is like. As we do this, we will not enter the New Year as earthlings burdened with toils and cares, but as children of God advancing toward their goal with clear vision and heads erect. In all the circumstances of life it remains true that God has not given us a spirit of discouragement, but a spirit of power and love and self-discipline. Not self-reliance, or the New Year will soon bring us into personal bankruptcy. His power is made perfect in our weakness." Though he was aware of his own weakness and must at times have longed for a more restful life, when he looked at the hardships his refugees had endured he was always encouraged to press on 'despite everything.'

Early in the New Year Cornelius and Mary went to Friedelsheim in the Palatinate to honor Johannes Foth, who had been pastor of the same congregation for fifty years. That excited CF, and that's how he viewed his own work. If God calls a man into a ministry, he should stay in that ministry faithfully until God calls him on. That was why he wanted to stay in Moscow in 1928,

and that's why he never gave up on his *Reiseschuld* calling, and that's why he was staying on in Europe now. It was in letters to his sons in Canada that he mentioned, about this time, that Mary's 'instinct' told her, they should be returning to Canada in the summer. Whenever she had an empty box in her hand, she would say "we better keep that, we'll need it when we pack up this summer!" From his side, he just kept reiterating that there is still a great deal of work to be done in Europe, there are still needs and challenges on every hand. In Mary's letters to the children, she expressed her concern that Cornelius had become so europeanized, that if he didn't make the break soon, he might never fit back into the Canadian scene. He knew that her instinct in leaving Moscow was right, and her instinct in buying the house in Winnipeg when she did was right, and probably even her instinct in moving the family to BC was right, but he believed also that he was in the will of God where he was and should leave the future in God's hands. They were able to discuss this matter freely with one another and their children, and to keep bringing it to the Lord in prayer. They had each learned over the years the need to stand by their convictions, but to do so humbly. In this case they knew that they couldn't both be right; but they also knew that they were committed to laying down their lives, and that God had often done more in tough situations than either of them could have asked or thought. In this way their marriage not only survived the long separations and inevitable tensions but was strengthened in the process. At this point in their lives Mary was reminding Cornelius of all the letters, newspapers, pamphlets, books and other documents he had gathered all his life intending at some time to sort them and pour over them and even do some writing. Maybe the time for more quiet thought and reflection was drawing nearer.

It was early in the new year as well, that CF received an invitation through good friends of his in Canada, to receive an honorary doctorate through a foreign Christian university. They sincerely felt that his dedicated and distinguished service to the wider brotherhood should be recognized in this way. He declined. He was happy for friends and associates of his who had earned degrees, and felt altogether right about some of them who received honorary degrees, but somehow he couldn't believe that it was

appropriate in his situation. Mary agreed with him. For CF his service to God carried its own reward. Like David he had simply sought to 'serve the purposes of God in his own generation.'

Reflecting on the meaning of this in an article written early in 1954 he concludes that perhaps our greatest act of service to God's Kingdom in our time, is our prayers for the world and the governments of our day. Surveying the varied political systems Mennonites on both sides of the ocean have found themselves under, CF exhorts them all to pray for their leaders as well as all their suffering and imprisoned loved ones, giving thanks for everyone that has found freedom in the West. "Let's face it, their return was an answer to many prayers. It was proof, further, of the fact that our God is able to help. O that all those returning, and their families, would give God the honor for their deliverance. For only then will our intercessions be pleasing to God. Let us continue to remember in our prayers, those behind the Iron Curtain who are still awaiting the hour of their release."

He goes on to remind his readers to be constant in prayer for the Big Four Summit talks then taking place in Berlin, and to trust God for a peaceful outcome of such conferences, particularly in decisions affecting their oppressed brethren. Encouraging them to intercede like Abraham in Genesis 18, and Jesus Himself (Heb 7:25), he exhorts them not to give up but to remember that God will be glorified as prayer is answered.

### **Good Friday Sermon**

On Good Friday, April 16, CF was invited to preach the sermon at the Frankfurt Mennonite Church. It was an occasion for him to reflect on the heart of his faith, the sacrifice of Jesus on the Cross, in the context of his troubled times in Europe. Quoting from Joel 2:30-31 "And I will display wonders in the sky and on the earth, blood, fire, and columns of smoke. The sun will be turned into darkness, and the moon into blood, before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes," he compared the events described in the text to the horrors recently experienced in Europe and Russia. And then to add to that he described the newer horror of nuclear war with its bigger and better bombs.

Meditating on man's great need for forgiveness he focuses his thoughts on the great act of Atonement expressed in the Cross. In seeking to give expression to this mystery he recalled a story heard in his youth in Russia,

As a student more than forty years ago I was deeply impressed by a historical incident that was related to us. In the year 1797 a prince was born in the Caucasus. His name was Schamyl. He was a freedom-loving man of the mountains, whose life's purpose was to retain this freedom for the Caucasus, and to resist the Russians to the utmost. He had two qualities which were particularly praiseworthy: his uncompromising sense of justice, and the love he had for his mother, who always accompanied him on his expeditions. One day it was reported to the prince that critical information had been leaked from his headquarters tent to the enemy. This was treason! According to the rules of these mountain people, the prince made the following proclamation: "Whoever has done this deed will receive one hundred lashes on his bare back before our assembled warriors." Soon thereafter it was proven to the prince that his own mother was the guilty one! Schamyl entered his tent and spent the next three days and three nights in deep contemplation. He neither ate, nor drank, nor could he sleep. There was a battle raging within him. "A prince cannot break his word, Schamyl. What will happen among my people to truth and justice if I do not apply the same rules to my own flesh and blood?" At last he emerged from his tent and summoned his people to appear before him. His mother stood before him, and beside her the man with the lash; the crowd watched breathlessly. Then Schamyl, deathly pale, spoke firmly: "The word of a king stands! Justice is sacred. Flogger, do your duty, and do not spare the lash, strike as if this were the vilest of offenders. But—and he throws his princely mantle to the ground—I am my mother's flesh and blood, and I will bear the punishment in her stead!

Of course this incident from history is not an explanation of what happened at Golgotha. But the love shown by the son in this case gives us an idea of the love that God showered on us, while we were still sinners. On the one hand we have mankind in dire need, and with a deep longing for release, and on the other hand we have God, and in Him there is light and life and love. But between God and man there is a great gulf, which with every sin of man becomes wider and deeper. We are not able to bridge this gap. And then it is Christ, the lamb of God, who freely gives himself by his cruel death on the cross, and thereby bridges this great gulf between God and man. And because of His broken body, and His shed blood we are now able to find our way back to the heart of God the Father.

He closed with these words,

This is what the Cross has accomplished. This is the power of the cross. The word of God bears witness to this. Either we believe the whole word and accept the consequences of such faith, or we ignore it and do not accept the lordship of Christ and accept the consequences of our unbelief. Either we neglect the 'cornerstone' and are subsequently dashed to pieces on it, or we build on it. As much as we would like to walk along a broad road of our own choosing, this is not possible. We either choose Christ and His kingdom, or we are against Him.

May God be gracious to us, and grant that we may be in a right relationship with Him so that His peace may reign in our hearts, and then radiate through us to others. May the Lord grant us this blessing in this Easter season (*Der Mennonit* June 1954).

It was truly the message of the Cross that lay at the heart of CF's ministry, and as his 'cornerstone' had always been built upon in the many phases of his work.

On the following day while working at his desk he suddenly went very pale and Mary had to assist him to his bed. He broke out into a sweat and Mary asked if she should call a doctor. He told her to wait. When he became chilly she brought him a hot cup of tea, and encouraged him to spend the rest of the morning in bed. He couldn't eat anything at noon, and said, that at times he felt like his life was ebbing away. Gradually his strength returned, as it usually had thus far, and by the evening he felt considerably better, and sat up and read.

He had a good night and on the next day, Easter Sunday, he felt much better and they decided to drive out to the Batzenhof to visit the Hodels and the Unruhs. They had a relaxed afternoon bringing Mary up to date on some of their experiences together in the past eight years, and then returned to Frankfurt. A few days later they drove down to Ludwigshafen for committee meetings of the Mennonite Settlement Society. Plans were made for CF to be present at the dedication in early June of the meeting room built at the Backnang settlement to accomodate their church services. He was looking forward to the occasion. Once the houses were built and the people had been gathered together out of their dispersion, the next step was always to build a Meeting Room so that they could worship and serve the Lord together.

An article written shortly after Easter for *Der Mennonit* returns to the theme of God's people being 'the salt of the earth' not only by their prayers but through their lives.

Referring to the increased tension in the world; the threat of nuclear war, post-Stalinist Soviet aggressiveness and America's weariness with her commitments in Europe, he affirms again the urgency of Jesus' simple command to his disciples to shine brightly amidst a perverse generation.

Surveying the continuing but apparently fruitless talks of leaders in Berlin, Geneva and Colombo he challenges believers to remember and pray for the members of the Body of Christ in all the nations of the world, and the many more who have yet to be granted the opportunity to respond to the Gospel.

He reminds the North American and European Mennonites of their own brethren seeking to be salt and light in Paraguay and their fruitful missionary work among the Indians of the Chaco.

He again challenges the North American brotherhood to be generous in their response to the ongoing needs of the work in Europe, concluding with the words,

Are you and I being salt? Let us continue to pray for an awakening, asking that it begin in us. May the risen Christ equip us in our dark days to be the light of the world and the salt of the earth.

This was to be the last exhortation written by CF to the many who had read so often of the trials and triumphs of his years of work among the refugees in Germany. When it was printed in *Der Mennonit* in June 1954 he had already experienced a different kind of awakening in the presence of His Risen Lord.

On May 2nd CF was at the main train station at six in the morning to pick up his son who was returning from a 'Concern' conference in Holland. Later in the afternoon he dropped him off in Heidelberg to catch a train to Basel. This was the last time I saw my father. He himself drove on to Enkenbach for a committee meeting of the Mennonite Old Peoples' Homes Society. On May 3 CF said farewell to his wife and daughter and headed north to Bremen and Hamburg where he needed to meet with the MCC staff and some of the Mennonite leaders. Mary received an invitation, after Cornelius arrived in Bremen, asking him to come

and speak at their Peace Conference in Heerewegen, Holland. She called him at Bremen and informed him about this. He loved his Dutch brethren and decided to accept their invitation. It was while driving from Bremen and nearing Gronau that he had the first of a series of heart attacks, that put him in the hospital that night. His earthly pilgrimage came to an end the next morning. Frank Epp says, "C.F. Klassen's death came at 10:30 a.m. Saturday, May 8, at Gronau. His death there, was symbolic of his consuming love for the refugees, for it was through the camp in that German city that practically all Mennonite peoples passed in the migrations to North and South America after World War II."

## Chapter 22

### HOME AT LAST

*"Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life"*  
*(Rev 2:10).*

So in the midst of one last journey, at a crossroads of refugees from Russia to new homelands in North and South America, C.F. Klassen's life journey was brought to an abrupt end. Though his wife was phoned to come to his bedside immediately, she arrived after his passing. Thus it was that the next day Mary returned alone to Frankfurt to notify family and friends of the sudden tragedy that had struck their lives. For nine short months she had shared his ministry in Germany after nine long years of separation. Yet she shared with all who now began to mourn his passing the sense of gratitude for a life poured out for the good of others. Irmy and Herb immediately returned from their places of study to be with their mother during the time of mourning.

CF's death came as a shock since few had any warning of his failing health. So many were accustomed to his brisk figure moving swiftly in and out of their lives that it was hard to grasp that his contribution to all their affairs was now ended.

#### **Memorial Services**

Almost immediately letters and messages of condolence began to pour into his home and the MCC office in Frankfurt. Since he had influenced so many now residing on other con-

tinents it was not surprising that memorial services were quickly arranged in Winnipeg, Leamington and Abbotsford in Canada, and at Akron, Pennsylvania and Goshen, Indiana in the United States.

The funeral service took place four days after his death in the Nord Ost Lutheran church in Frankfurt. To survey the wide circle of mourners and memorial services after his death, is to catch a glimpse of the breadth of grief his death created. As ripples when a stone is thrown into a pool, the circles of tribute and eulogy extended further and further as the news spread, and three continents picked up the theme of triumph and thankfulness in the midst of profound grief.

The list of those who addressed the many mourners almost reads like the funeral of a statesman. And indeed in his far-reaching impact upon countless lives, his influence was almost felt as that of a national leader. At such times of loss, the true meaning of Mennonite peoplehood emerges and one begins to understand the good fruit of those whose lives shape the futures and destinies of others with Christian principles and the true love of Christ. Few have been privileged to have such deep and lasting fruit in the lives of thousands of his own people. Not only at the Funeral in Frankfurt, but also at five other memorial services many voiced their praise and gratitude to God.

At the service in Winnipeg, CF's home for twenty years, brother A.H. Unruh gave the Word once more. At the memorial in BC, at the MEI, it was refugee leader brother Heinrich Bartel who presided. In Saskatoon, headquarters of the 'Board' that CF had served for fifteen years, J.J. Thiessen was in charge. In Akron, Pennsylvania, international headquarters of the MCC, Orie Miller led the meeting. At Goshen College, in Indiana, it was his old friend and associate, Dr. Harold S. Bender who set the tone.

At such times of grieving and remembering, the collective memory of a people is forged. The lasting qualities of the departed loved-one are focussed upon and the significant contributions of his life celebrated and honored. Indeed the themes of this biography were all on the lips of those chosen to represent the major groups gathered to pay their respects those sombre May days in 1954.

## **'Gott kann'**

Most often voiced was the frequently repeated phrase 'Gott kann.' Though applied to every hard circumstance of his life and ministry to the refugees, it was particularly challenging as quoted by Otto Schowalter on behalf of the German brethren CF had taken to his heart. Speaking of the shock-wave that had affected them at CF's death he testified to the many times CF's affirmation of faith 'Gott kann' had sparked *hope* in the hearts of the struggling post-war German brotherhood.

Characterizing CF as a 'man of hope' Schowalter acknowledged the role he had played in every phase of life among their brotherhood.

A living hope for our German congregations, a living hope for our youth, a living hope for those in the Berlin enclave, and for our many brethren still under Communism. That is what we want to hang on to, and that is how we want to express our thanks, by taking hold of it, and not disappointing brother Klassen in this area. So that when we see him again in that great eternity, we will be able to look him straight in the eyes with a clear conscience and praise God together—our God of all Hope! (DM June 1954 85)

Other funeral tributes spelled out in practical ways how CF's service gave concrete expression to that hope.

No effort seemed too great to him when it came to helping a family find a new home(land). He didn't see his work as just kind help to masses of people, but as a missionary responsibility. (83)

Telegrams were read from other leaders in Europe and North America, both from within the brotherhood but also from government and service agencies, expressing their sense of personal loss and grief.

The many once homeless ones now living in the settlements and the large group of elderly refugees now housed in the various homes CF had helped found, were represented too. It was touching that the aged and infirm, so often in history overlooked or cast aside by ambitious rulers, should have been so close to CF's

heart. The 300 in homes and the 1,000 members of the society needed Ulrich Hege's voice to express their gratitude since most were not able to be present.

Representatives of the Dutch, Swiss, French and German Mennonites all testified to a similar challenge received through CF's ministry in their respective countries—the call to transcend national boundaries and unite to serve the suffering brethren.

As one after another rose to his feet to thank God for the life of this man, his outstanding contribution seemed to be, that widow and orphan, stranger and pilgrim were honoring him as the one who had created 'home' again for them after the turbulent upheaval of the war years.

Cornelius Wall, repeating unknowingly CF's text at the 1930 Mennonite World Conference, chose Psalm 84:5-7 to sum up his life:

Blessed are the men whose strength is in thee, in whose heart are the highways to Zion. As they go through the valley of weeping they make it a place of springs; the early rain also covers it with pools. They go from strength to strength; the God of gods will be seen in Zion! How many 'valleys of weeping' had been traversed since those early years in Moscow. Yet who could have foreseen the many 'springs of hope' in countless lives at this time? "The God of gods will be seen in Zion! Through all the dark days of his ministry here, our brother was firmly convinced that in the last analysis God will triumph." Wall rightly recognized the highways to Zion that had been built into CF's life down the difficult years, highways of faith, trust, compassion and mercy. God's strength had truly been forged into his life so that he too could turn and strengthen his brethren, imparting the same strength and hope to them in their hour of need.

Benjamin Unruh brought the perspective of all the exiled Russian Mennonites in the words of Jesus in John 9:4 "I must work the works of him who sent me while it is day, night cometh when no man can work." Surveying CF's hard work from the early years in Russia up to the present he recalled the zeal with which CF applied himself to the original task of uniting the colonies in the face of Russian disintegration. Yet the night had come for that work and CF had applied the same zeal and hard work in Europe to seek out and unite his brethren there, in the common task of alleviating suffering. Unruh's plea for the continuation of such a

working unity was fit tribute to the tireless efforts and vision for which CF was so well known.

But of all the friends who stood beside his grave, none embodied the mystery of God's ways and His destiny in our lives more than Peter Froese. During the critical years in Moscow they had lived under one roof and shared their lives. Surveying the ensuing years Froese recalled the sharp parting of the ways in 1928 when CF went to Canada and on to his fruitful ministry, while Froese himself went to prison and years of a hidden ministry to his brethren there. Humbly acknowledging his brother's role in helping the refugees he also owned his own debt to CF,

"O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God, how unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out" (Rom 11:33). Little is known of Froese's life after the traumatic years of his imprisonment and his subsequent escape to Germany. But one senses his friendship with CF was a life-line and his sense of loss as personal as any who gathered that day to remember the life of one who had been 'brother' to thousands, yet close intimate personal friend to each in his own special and unique way. "And now in these last years, our dear Cornelius has helped me and many others in so many ways. He was a friend and brother first and foremost to those who had been oppressed and humiliated, the poor, those who didn't know which way to turn. We know, because he visited them, there back in Russia, and also here. And now he has left to us a legacy, the urgent request to help our brothers in need! Let us take it to heart. For behind the Iron Curtain there are still many poor brothers and sisters of ours who are being harassed and oppressed. We remember them. And by God's grace we will do what we can to see that this legacy of mercy is continued as the opportunity to help them arises. (MR 2 June 1954 2)

Quoting another often used phrase of CF's, Otto Schowalter referred to the statement "Love exists by sacrifice." Jesus put it practically, "greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends." It was this quality of a simple disciple and brother that were uppermost in peoples hearts. Without doubt his life's consuming quest 'Seeking his brethren' had been a very demanding one. But motivated by the love of a true disciple and brother it had not been a burden he bore unwillingly. The sacrifice of even life itself was not too great. The reward made it all worthwhile and like his Master the joy set before him ener-

gized the journey. Those paying tribute to all that had been accomplished in those brief post-war years could truly say CF's love had led him to offer his life for them. He would not have wanted it any other way. And like another who saw the fruit of his travail and was satisfied, CF too would be satisfied. CF's passing was sudden and in many ways unexpected, busy as he was with the affairs of his work for the refugees and the European Mennonite brotherhood. But in another sense it came at a fitting time, when many of his life-goals had been reached. He had made a contribution that was unique and which only he could have made. And the total impact of his life, short as it seemed to many who outlived him, embodied a clear challenge that now could be grappled with by ensuing generations. Sooner or later the torch would be passed on. As a close friend of CF's throughout his life Harold Bender's letter to Mary sums up both CF's contribution to the wider Mennonite community and the legacy he leaves to succeeding generations,

I cannot tell you how deep is my own sense of personal loss. You know how close Cornelius and I were in so many things, probably closer than anyone else in the MCC family. How often we shared the most intimate problems and burdens, and how often we found ourselves in complete accord and unity in the decisions which had to be reached. It was a great privilege to work with him so closely these last ten years in particular....

He was much more than an administrator of relief and refugee service, he was a spiritual force....

We bless God that he was given to us for so many years even though we would have wanted to keep him so much longer....

I think that for a number of our young people Cornelius was a hero; a Mennonite hero who incorporated faith and action, love and service, and a loyalty to our Mennonite church and its calling, in a way that scarcely anyone else has in this generation" (MR 23 June 54 3).

Writing in the *Canadian Mennonite* Frank Epp summed up CF's life:

In the passing of C.F. Klassen the Mennonite church has lost one of its greatest servants. For his efforts in Mennonite immigrations and refugee resettlements his name will continue on the lips

of many generations, and his good works will follow him. He will be remembered for his respect for human personality. He met prince and pauper on an equal level. He had special compassion for widows and orphans, for the poor and underprivileged. To thousands of persons, whom he knew by name, he was a personal friend. Gifted in diplomacy, he never lost his dignity. Although a staunch and valued member of one denomination Klassen had a heart wide open to the interests and concerns of other churches. He was inter-church and international. He shook hands with all believers and called them his brothers. He belonged to all because he served all (Epp 426-7).

As one who sought and found his brethren on three continents, CF served them with everything he had. The 'legacy of mercy' he left to the following generations has found expression in the myriad forms of service to mankind that have characterized the work of MCC and the wider fellowship for the last half of the twentieth century. May the sharing of his story strengthen us all for the task ahead.

## A NOTE ABOUT SOURCES

### I. C.F.'s Writings:

#### A. Published:

1. Reports (68) in the *Mennonitische Rundschau* between Sept. 1945 and Mar. 1954 usually under the title "Aus unserer Fluechtlingsarbeit" (from our refugee work)

2. Articles (29) in *Der Mennonit* between Jan. 1948 and June 1954. Fifteen lead articles and fourteen others.

3. Mennonite World Conference addresses:

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1936 (3) Amsterdam: "Devotional" Proceedings Karlsruhe: Heinrich Schneider Verlag, 1936.

1948 (4) Goshen/Newton: "Mennonite Refugees: Our Challenge" M.Q.R. Apr 1950 pp 136-141

1952 (5) Basel: "Our Refugee Work: Past, Present and Future" Proceedings, Karlsruhe: Heinrich Schneider Verlag, 1952.

#### B. Unpublished:

1. "Biographical Sketch" handwritten, 11 pages, covering his earliest years.

2. "Curriculum Vitae" typed single spaced, 4 pages, November 1936.

3. "Diary" handwritten, daily entries from Nov. 8 to Dec. 31, 1947, 66 pages.

4. Letters

(a) at CMBC Winnipeg— covering primarily the years 1929 to 1939, to men such as David Toews, DP Enns etc.

(b) at MBBC Winnipeg— covering primarily the years from 1939 to 1954, to men such as BB Janz, PC Hiebert etc.

(c) at Goshen College Archives Goshen—covering primarily the MCC years 1944 to 1954, to men such as HS Bender, Otto Schowalter etc.

(d) Private letters to family and friends in the possession of the authors, mostly from the years 1945 to 1954.

5. Minutes— which quote CF or include his reports:

(a) of the Canadian Mennonite Board of Colonization (Winnipeg)

(b) of the Provincial Conferences of the MBs and GCs (Winnipeg)

(c) of the MCC Executive Committee (Goshen)

(d) of the German Mennonite Church Conferences (Weierhof)

(e) of "Mennonitische Siedlungshilfe" (Weierhof)

(f) of "Mennonitische Altersheime" (Weierhof)

(g) of "Europaeische Mennonitische Bibelschule"

(Bienenberg)

6. Tapes

(a) CF to his brother Henry and friends in Winnipeg, May 1950

(b) CF to his wife and family in BC, Dec. 1952.

## II. Writings about C.F.

### A. Published - Books (in order of frequency of quotation)

1. Toews, John B. ed. *The Mennonites in Russia 1917 to 1930: Selected Documents*. Winnipeg MB: Christian Press, 1975.

2. --- --- . *Lost Fatherland: the Story of the Mennonite Emigration from Soviet Russia 1921-1927*. Scottdale PA: Herald Press, 1967.

3. --- --- . *Czars, Soviets and Mennonites*. Newton KS: Faith and Life Press, 1982.

4. Epp, Frank H. *Mennonite Exodus: The Rescue and Resettlement of the Russian Mennonites since the Communist Revolution*. Altona MB: D.W. Friesen and Sons Ltd., 1962.

5. Hiebert, P. C. and Orie O. Miller eds. *Feeding the Hungry: Russia Famine 1919-1925*. Scottdale PA: Mennonite Central Committee, 1929.

6. Unruh, John C. *In the Name of Christ: the Story of the*

*M.C.C. from 1920 to 1951.* Scottdale PA: Herald Press, 1952.

7. Brucks, J.H. and H. Hooge eds. *Neu-Samara am Tock.* Clearbrook BC: Fraser Valley Printers, 1964.
8. Penner, Horst. *Weltweite Bruderschaft: ein mennonitisches Geschichtsbuch.* Weierhof: Verlag Mennonitischer Geschichtsverein, 1984.
9. Bender, Urie A. *Soldiers of Compassion.* Scottdale PA: Herald Press, 1969.
10. Dyck, Anna Reimer. *Anna: from the Caucasus to Canada.* Hillsboro KS: Menn. Breth. Publ House, 1979.

#### *B. Published Articles*

1. Dyck, Peter J. "C.F. Klassen zum Andenken." *Mennonitische Rundschau* 24 Apr. 1974.
2. --- --- . "I remember C.F. Klassen 1894-1954," *Canadian Mennonite* 13 June 1967.

#### *B. Unpublished Writings*

1. Klassen, Henry F. "Er Kann." A 31 page typewritten biographical memoir of CF by his brother appended with 44 pages of documents, written at the request of the MB Board of Publications and published first in a 12-part series in the *MR* 27 Sept. 1972 to 20 Dec. 1972. It was translated into English in 1978 and was made available to the authors.
2. Dyck, Peter J. and Elfrieda. A three-part video series on Russian Mennonite refugees in Berlin and their emigration to South America beginning with the famous Volendam episode, and made available by the MCC in 1988.



## C.F. Klassen and the Russian Mennonite Refugees

C.F. Klassen could easily have pursued a career in business, in a high paying profession or even as a skilled diplomat. Instead he chose to serve his God and his people. In the process he sacrificed himself.

C.F. Klassen's life manifests the theme of mercy and compassion in its responses to the cries of the needy in a broken world. This quality delineates him as a man especially equipped to become a role model for this present generation, faced as we are with heightened awareness of global suffering and the ever-present kaleidoscope of human heartache and horror. We can be thankful that the example of lives like his can become pointers along our common journey.

*C.F. Klassen was infused and energized by God's grace. His life reflected gentleness, strength, dedication, persistence, hope and compassion. He poured out his life in loving service to his sisters and brothers. His is an amazing and inspiring story of courage and commitment to Christ's reconciling ministry.*

Atlee Beechy, MCC European Area Director, 1946-1949

*C.F. Klassen was one of the most effective and most trusted Christian leadership figures of our century in his milieu. For thousands of refugees his ministry opened a future. For churches in western Europe he catalyzed new level of cooperation and commitment. It is a service to us all to have his story made available.*

John H. Yoder, Professor, Department of Theology,  
University of Notre Dame

### About The Authors

Herb and Maureen Klassen, Clearbrook, BC have both been involved in teaching—Herb as history professor at Trinity Western University and Maureen as English instructor at Columbia Bible College.

C.F. Klassen's service efforts have continued in his children who are involved in several service organizations, including Habitat for Humanity, House of Refuge, Abbotsford, BC and Peace and Service Committee, MCC, BC.

